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# For Two Hundred Years The Same

An intimate and revealing account  
of the beginning and growth of the  
town of Chester, Connecticut and  
the Protestant Churches therein

by

THELMA W. CLARK

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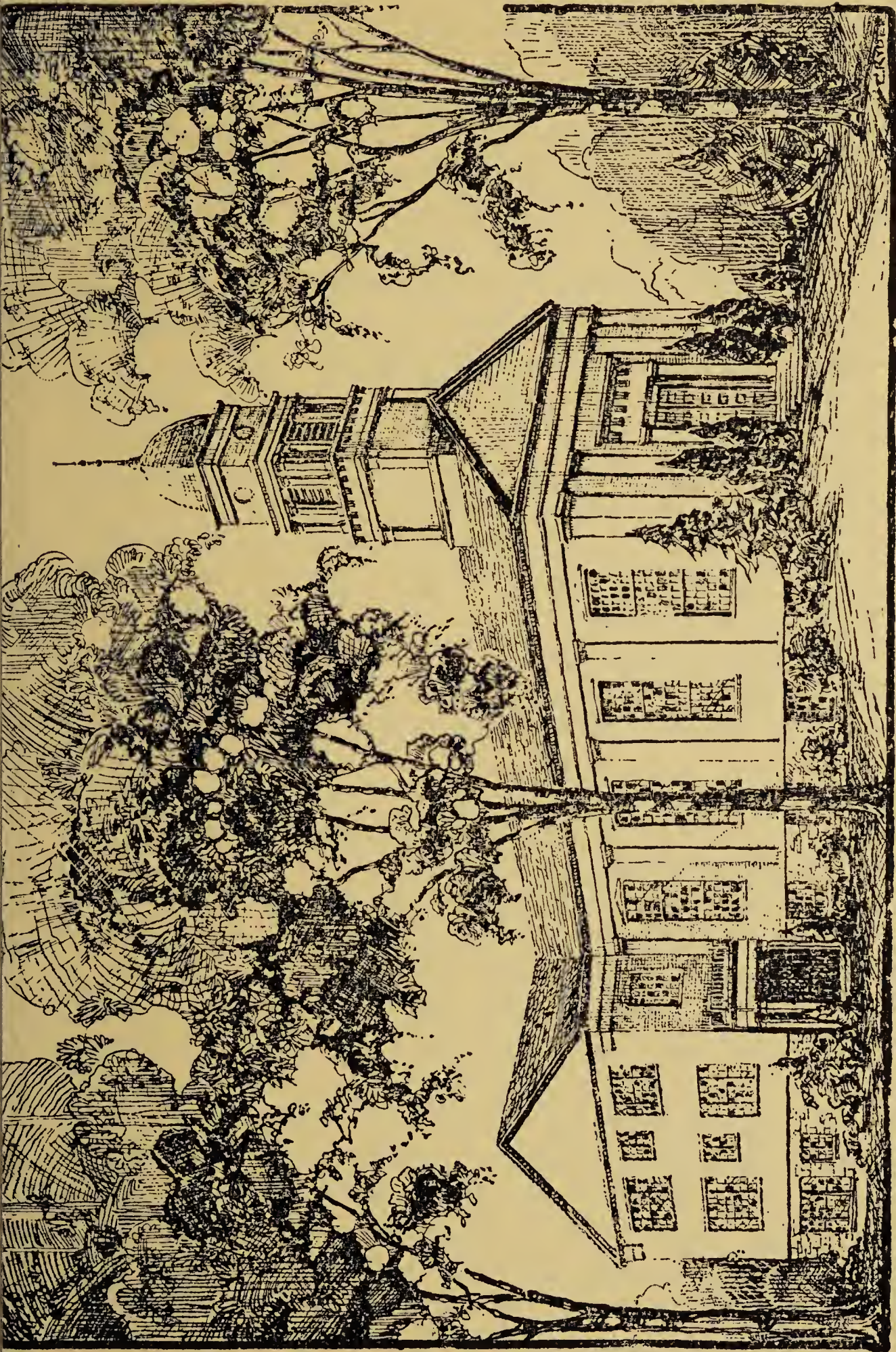
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*The United Church of Chester*





## Preface

This little booklet is not intended strictly as a history. It is rather an intimate and revealing account of the beginning and growth of the town of Chester and the Protestant churches therein.

In February, 1948, Rev. E. Ray Burchell suggested that a paper dealing with the growth of the churches might be written for use at the dedication of the remodeled building in the Fall. Several days of research brought to light so many interesting sidelights on the personalities and temper of the people who formed our town that the proposed paper has become a booklet. It seemed that the facts discovered were too humorous, too appealing, too fascinating to be disregarded in the writing of the usual rather statistical paper.

Search has been made into church records of both the Baptist and Congregational societies in town and of the mother churches in Centerbrook and Winthrop. Old scrapbooks, diaries, family papers of some of the original settlers, town records, society records, and personal remembrances of some of the older townspeople have been used as a basis for this story of Chester. Undoubtedly there are other records or papers hidden away which would throw still more light on various matters mentioned herein. This history, however, is as complete as it has been possible to make it in the limited time available.

Unfortunately all of the early records of the Baptist Church and its societies are missing. As a result the greater part of the material concerning that group has been taken from a paper written by the author for the Centennial Celebration of that church in 1932, and later enlarged for publication in *The New Era* in 1936 at the Centennial of the town. At that time the early records were available. It is unfortunate that so few interesting details about the Baptist Church are known, but it is hoped that this unavoidable slighting of that portion of our church history will be overlooked.

There may be some readers of this booklet who will find omissions and errors. An attempt has been made to be impartial and chary in the use of names of individuals. There were dozens who might have been named. There were others whom it is well not to name. The chief purpose of this booklet is to show the human, detailed side of the history of the churches in Chester; therefore it is hoped that those who read may chuckle and not frown.

Miss Kate Silliman has been of special help in providing information on several phases of church and town history as well as data

on members of the Silliman family. Mrs. Ida Abbey loaned her mother's scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. Mrs. Mamie Gorham Spratt gave personal recollections of the first Baptist church building, and furnished details concerning her father and mother who were most influential in that society. Mrs. Theodore Foster and Mrs. Bessie Crook at the Library, Mrs. Augustus Williams, Mrs. C. J. Bates, Mrs. Ralph Monroe, Mr. and Mrs. Perley Webb, Miss Elizabeth H. Smith, Mrs. Elizabeth Goodwin, and Mr. Sumner Smith supplied interesting details which often clarified items only mentioned in the other sources. Mr. Erving Wright, church clerk, checked some of the facts. Mr. Wesley G. Dannen and Miss Case, of the State Library, went to great pains to look up references. Reverend and Mrs. Burchell have been willing listeners and have made many helpful suggestions. Mr. Edward Hastings gave freely of his comment, criticism, and suggestions in editing the first rough draft. Thanks are due all who have helped in the preparation of this account of our church heritage. We are all especially indebted to those who sponsored the project so that it might be presented in printed form.

T. W. C.

Chester, Connecticut, July 14, 1948.



## CHAPTER I

### “In the Beginning . . .”

In front of the huge fireplace in the common room of Jonathan Hough's house set high on a hill—its nearest neighbor some two miles away—clustered a group of earnest men clad in rough homespun. Their weathered faces were serious and their tones grave. Their discussion was as grave as their mien, for they were met to appoint two of their number to take a petition to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth, a petition that the few inhabitants of the Pataquonk section of Saybrook might be allowed to have their own worship services during the winter, or “winter privilege”.

Two of the men were members of the three man Prudential Committee directing the activities of the North Parish or the Second Ecclesiastical Society of Saybrook (Centerbrook). All were members of that parish, and several of the older ones were remembering, as they sat before the fire, how when they first moved into the Pataquonk Quarter they had had to trek the fourteen long weary miles afoot or on horseback to attend divine services and society meetings at Saybrook, down on the Sound. They had trudged those long miles often, over roads little more than Indian trails, because failure to attend the Sabbath services meant being hailed before the meeting, charged with improper conduct, and fined. So when, eight years before, in 1722, all those living in the northern part of Saybrook parish had been permitted to establish their own parish, and had built a meeting house at what is now Centerbrook, they had been much relieved. Even traveling to Centerbrook (or Pettipaug, as it was then called) was difficult especially in the winter when it was necessary to attend the society meetings as well as the Sabbath day services.

The two members of the Second Parish committee realized that what they were about to do would not be pleasing to the rest of the Pettipaug residents. They went ahead, nevertheless, and appointed two representatives from their number to meet with the committee from Pettipaug to go to the Assembly, then meeting at New Haven, to discuss the petition of the Pataquonk inhabitants. So, in the brown leaved, worn edged old book of the Pettipaug Society records appears this entry dated January 24, 1722/3:

Patequonk Being Exempted acording to ye last Asemblys Act . . . . Att ye Same meating it was voted yt Some man Shall be improued in ye behalf of this Society hombly to represent to ye General Cort in may next ye difficilly of ye Sd Society, by reason of ye discharging ye People of Pataquonk from their ministerial . . . . for five monts and pray ye Assambly in their Grate wisdom to revok thire act by which the discharge is made.

The arguments of the Pataquonk inhabitants proved strong, however, and the General Assembly allowed them to have "winter privilege"—that is, permission to conduct their own worship services during the four winter months. They must, nevertheless, continue to pay their taxes for the support of the parish in Pettipaug, "where they belong".

So much gained, the good fathers next worked to get their taxes revoked for that same period. Nearly three years later they were successful, insofar as the members of the Pettipaug Parish voted that Pataquonk should have a month allowed it free from paying its portion of the minister's salary, and should be permitted to hire a gospel minister from December to April.

Winter services having proved feasible and so much more convenient than having to go clear to Pettipaug, the growing number of inhabitants of Pataquonk Quarter toyed with the idea of becoming a parish on their right. In 1739 they petitioned the General Assembly, and also requested Pettipaug Parish to set up a boundary line, at the same time suggesting one of their own. This proposed boundary did not exactly suit the good men of Pettipaug, for it was contested by a committee appointed "to Remonstrate against ye Report as being unreasonable and very injurious". Apparently the committee managed to settle the matter amiably, because as of September 25, 1740, this entry appears in the old record of Pettipaug Parish:

Upon motion of ye Inhabitence of Patequnk Concerning a Dividing Line between them and Putapogue if the Generall Assembly Shuld See Case to Comply their motion that thay Should be a Distink Society the Inhabetence of Patequnk and the Inhabetence of ye Southern part of Society Colled Putapogue mutually aGreed and voted yt ye Dividing Line between Sd Societies Should as folows vig: a Direct West Line from the Bridge over Deep River att the Country Roud untell it Intersect in Killingworth Line and from Sd Bridge that the Sd River Colled Deep River be Ye Dividing Line from Sd Bridge to the Grat River.



Being thus in a lenient frame of mind, the meeting went on to vote "that thay willing if the Generall Assembly Should See Cause in their Great wisdom to Comply with the motion of their friends att Patiquunk to Set them of from them to be a Diffinet Society that thay Should be Set off from them accordingly".

So, in October of 1740, Pataquonk Quarter was made a society, and named Chester. Those families that had first journeyed to Saybrook, then for the past eighteen years to Pettipaug (Centerbrook) now could call themselves a parish with all the privileges and duties that such entailed. They were allowed to tax all unimproved land for three years to defray parish charges, and thereupon set about seeking a minister.

A year and a half later the first resident minister took up his duties. As was common in those days, a "settlement" for the minister was called for. Ministers were scarce. Since they were expected to settle in a place for life they were invariably given, as an added inducement, a "settlement", or a sum equal to two years' salary. This amount was raised by additional taxation, and was expected to cover the purchase of land and the building of a home and barn. Whether or not the infant parish found it difficult to get a minister, it seems to have been overly generous in its "settlement" terms, for the first pastor was voted a salary of £150 annually, with a settlement payment of £300 to be paid £75 a year for four years. It was also agreed to "erect him a house of fourty feet long and thirty feet wide, cover the same, he finding nails and window frames, build the Chimneys and Cellar, all to be accomplished within Eighteen months from this date [Sept. 16, 1741], and further we agree that if we can procure the Lot Commonly Called Ministers Lot, he shall have it if he See cause . . ."

It was not, however, as simple as it sounded. The minister, after thinking it over, decided that the proposed house was too large, and he suggested one 39 feet long and 29 feet wide "and of proportionable height", and the Society agreed. Even the date of his ordination was changed. Originally set for November 20, 1741, it was postponed to December 9th of that year "notwithstanding there hath been some demur by, the groundless objections of some few particular persons put to our proceedings as voted and agreed upon". By this time the good man was wondering if the new parish really wanted him, since before the December ordination date had rolled round there had been another Society meeting wherein it was voted "the

Prudential Committee shall have power to procure the preaching the gospel by a New Orthodox Minister". Finally, however, the minister was ordained, but not until September 15th of 1742, a good year after he had first been approached on the matter of coming to Chester, or the Fourth Parish of Saybrook as the Society was legally called.

Still the minister had no house. He and his horse were cared for by various members of the parish. Also the infant church had no house of worship. Those must have been difficult and perplexing times, but they were weathered and the work of the parish slowly but surely began to take shape.



## CHAPTER II

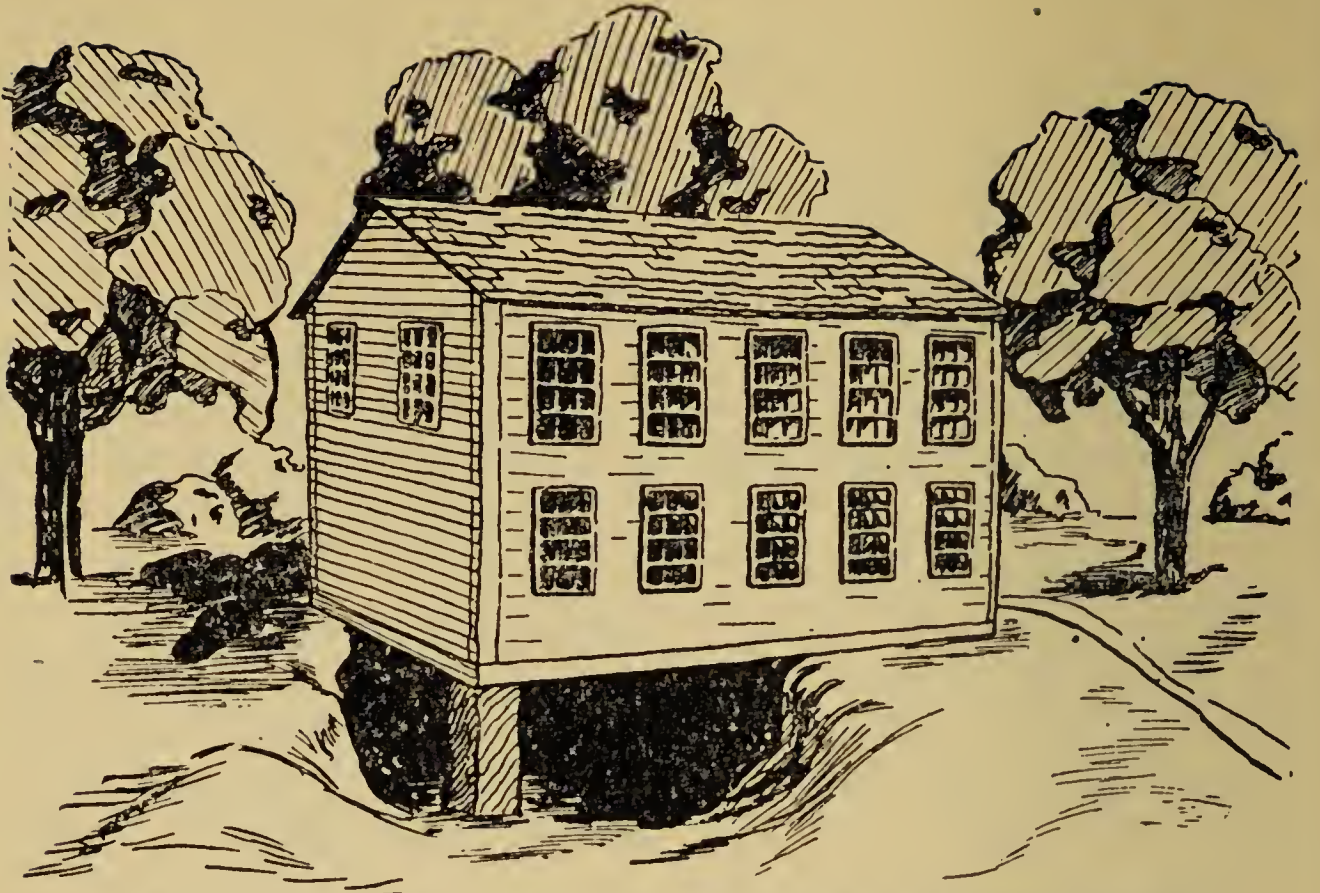
### “In My Father’s House . . .”

Since the “setting off” of the parish, the question of a meeting house had occupied the minds of the Society members. They must have had plenty to talk about on those long winter evenings when the members of the family gathered before evening prayers around the fireplace. Meeting after meeting was called, most of them at the home of Jonathan Hough where the first gathering to talk over their request for “winter privilege” was held. Committees were appointed to see to the building of both the minister’s dwelling and the meeting house. Meanwhile worship was held at Jonathan Hough’s. He seems to have been a prime mover in this venture, and apparently had a house large enough to accommodate the meetings and Sabbath worship.

What votes were passed and rescinded, what meetings called and adjourned, what arguments and discussions there were before the minister’s home and the first rough meeting house were finished. The minister moved into his dwelling before the worshipers moved into their meeting house, which for seven years was little more than a barn, probably not as good as some of the barns of the farmers who worshiped there. This first building soon came to be called “The Lord’s Barn”, since it had only a very rough floor, no permanent seats, windows, or pulpit. The walls were never plastered, a ceiling never installed, the joists and beams of the structure furnishing a very rustic ornamentation. Ten years after the organization of the Society, parish matters had prospered to such an extent that it was voted:

first [we] will build a good pulpit, and Likewise that we will Lay a good duple flore, and glase all the Low windows (to be glased with good sash glas.) and Make the doors, and put twelve apise in the garlires in the uper part of the meeting house, and raise the Lower side of the meeting hous.”

This last was a reference to the fact that the foundation had never been finished, so that legend has it that sheep congregated beneath the building. Their bleating vied with the good minister to such an extent that services had to be interrupted until the animals could be driven out.



*The Lord's Barn—First Congregational Meeting House*

This first meeting house stood to the southeast of the present town hall, near the crest of Story's Hill. It was the focal point of the parish. Custom and expediency decreed that the tavern should stand near it. Sentences imposed by the court held in the meeting house were speedily carried out at the whipping-post conveniently located nearby. Also close at hand was the first school building and the burying ground. On the wide green at the foot of the hill the militia drilled in later years. To meeting on the Sabbath came all those who were able to be about. Down from the hills of the infant parish came whole families, perhaps with the mother and older daughter riding, the rest of the children and the father afoot. In the winter those fortunate enough to possess small foot-stoves brought them in a vain endeavor to keep from being almost unbearably cold. The unheated building, lacking both plaster and ceiling, was a cold spot on those long winter days when the minister mounted up into the high pulpit and the deacons took their places beneath and before it, facing the assembly. The people were seated with respect to age, office, and estate, and the meeting began with a prayer usually lasting a quarter of an hour. A chapter was read and explained and a psalm announced which the deacon "lined out". This done, the minister arose, turned his hourglass beside him, announced his text, and thundered his interpretations, denunciations, and orthodoxy. After



the hour-long sermon there was another prayer and the blessing. Then the people went out to eat their luncheon, replenish their footstoves with glowing coals from a neighbor's house, and prepare for the afternoon service. This was much like the morning's, except that at times after the sermon there would be baptism of the infants, even though zero weather froze both the minister's breath and the bread on the communion table. It was at this service that contributions were made, the people going forward with their gifts.

This first meeting house, crude as it was, was used for all worship and parish business for over fifty years. As buildings will, however, it began to show the strain of constant use, and many times funds were voted for repairs. Sometimes money was voted that was not available. Thus a committee was once allowed the money it spent "out of ye money, that is now in ye arrears (when collected)." A few years later the committee was voted a sum to repair the meeting house as much as "needful for the present winter." Three years later additional funds, not to exceed £3, were authorized. In spite of these repairs, however, the building became so dilapidated that a major problem confronted the parish. Various means of raising money were tried. A subscription was started to raise £40, and later a tax was laid of 2 pence on the pound on the previous year's tax list, this money to be spent for "Joyce and braces, also Glass and Sashes and what sills are necessary and to put them into Sd House."

Some of the sounder minds, however, believed that instead of repairs, a new building was needed. They swayed the parish to such an extent that in 1791 it was voted to "build a Meeting house provided we have Suitable encouragement by Subscriptions, and can agree upon place to Set it." *That* was the hitch this time. At the same meeting it was voted a committee should "Set a Stake where to Set a Meeting house provided we agree to build, and make their report to this meeting." Apparently the committee went outside the school house where the meeting was being held, drove a stake, and came back, for the next line reads "The Committee made their report that they Set the Stake on the middle of the green near the School house."

Less than a month later, and after countless fireside-and-street-corner-consultations, another meeting voted not to set the meeting house where the stake was driven, and appointed a new committee to set a new stake for a new location. This too was unsuccessful, for

later in the meeting it was reported the Committee "can't agree". The meeting thereupon took matters into its own hands and voted that the meeting house should be west of the school house, on the green, the same green that fronts the present town hall. The school house where these meetings were held was apparently somewhere east of the present town hall.

Nevertheless the old "Lord's Barn" was still on the minds of the good fathers of the town. They were loath to discard it, and when it was found that the subscription list for a new building was not filled, they decided to ask outside aid and advice on repairing the old building. From surrounding towns opposing factions brought in various authorities. Some advocated repairs, some rebuilding, and the parish continued to seethe during the week and wonder if the Sabbath worshipers would find themselves suddenly falling through the floor of the old building.

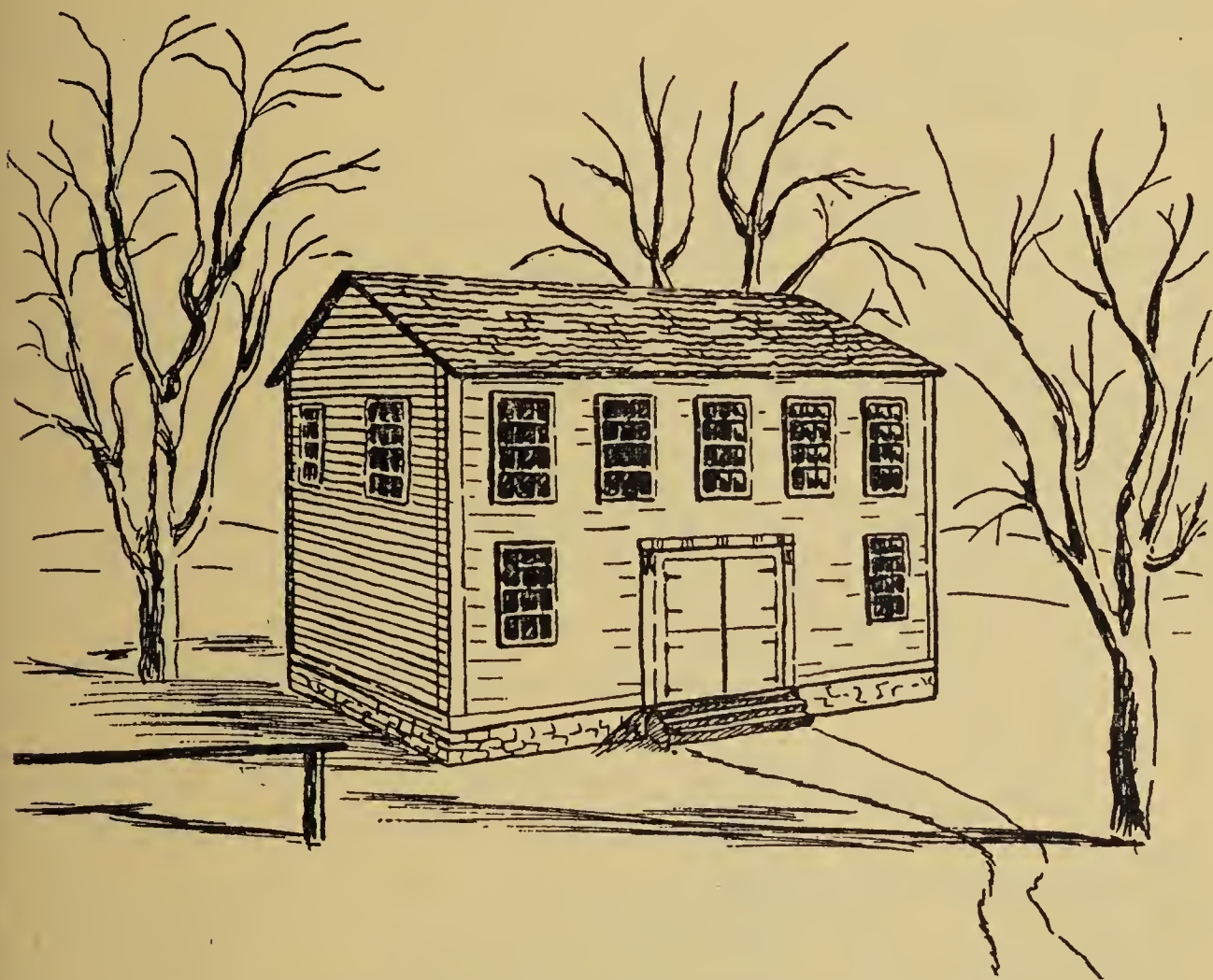
At last things came to a head, and three years after the first meeting to suggest a new building, another stake was driven and it was voted to put the new meeting house "at the North end of the Green against the road leading from the Main road to Cedar Swamp." Still with the "Lord's Barn" in mind, they voted also "to Set up a frame of a Meeting house about the bigness of the old Meeting house." Eleven days later all this was reconsidered, a new committee appointed, and there followed four meetings within two months—meetings of which the only thing we know is they met and adjourned. All at once, however, work was underway and the frame up. It was voted to use the window frames and sash that were made to repair the old meeting house for the new one, also to make use of whatever "stuff in the old meeting house that will answer for to put into the New Meeting House, as far as Shall be thought Profitable."

By 1793 the second meeting house was finished, at least on the inside. Now when the good folk of Chester climbed or descended a hill, depending on the direction of their homes, and crossed the green for Sabbath Worship, they found themselves in a hall about the same size as the old "Lord's Barn", two stories in height, white plastered and ceiled. The pews were square compartments of white-paneled, dark-rimmed wood, with a door in the back of each and walls five feet high. The children could scarcely see over the tops of these walls to where the minister stood in his new pulpit with the sounding board over it. Some of them wondered whether it would



not be better to be out on the long bench-like seats which filled the front portion of the room, yet within these boxed enclosures the vague heat from the foot stoves did give a semblance of warmth, and the stern eye of the deacon could not so easily watch each furtive wiggle when the sermon became monotonous.

In back of the pulpit was a window through which could be seen one of the buttonwood trees from the square encircling the meeting house. Whether or not this window attracted more attention than the minister, within a few years the ladies provided a shade for it which could be pulled down and eliminate one distraction.



*Second Congregational Meeting House*

The building finished, a committee was appointed "to set a square of Buttonwood trees around the New Meeting house" and to paint it "as far as Capt. Warner has agreed with Mr. Wells and no farther at Present." No farther seems to have resulted in only one side and part of another being painted at that time. The next year one of the members was appointed an agent "to Procure Step Stones for the New Meeting house at the expense of the Society", and bids were received for sweeping the meeting house and taking

care of it, the lowest bidder being the head of the committee on painting the building, with a bid of 18 shillings for the year.

When the meeting house was finally completely painted it was red, with one casement door on the side we would now call the back, but which then fronted on the Cedar Swamp Road. For thirty-four years there was no means of heating, it being considered too sinful to warm the Lord's house. In 1827 the more advanced members of the parish prevailed, however, and a stove was put in, whereupon various members of the Sabbath congregation fainted away with the heat! No musical instrument was used for some time, until finally, a melodeon was installed near the pulpit, and later a bass viol joined in with its deep harmony. How the shades of the old choiristers must have writhed at this desecration!

Reluctantly it was voted "to make Sale of the old Meeting House at Some future Day." That is the last mention we have of the first meeting house of the parish of Chester.

Unfortunately the records of the period between the building of the second and third meeting houses are very scanty. We assume that the usual parish meetings were held, and the two services on the Sabbath, with the Preparatory Lecture on the Friday evening preceding the Sabbath on which there was communion. We do know that the meeting house on the green was the center of the parish affairs. There the militia trained, with the minister sitting on the meeting house steps beside the keg of rum for the boys drilling out on the grass.

The parish was growing, however, and the affairs with which it was concerned were growing too. The Prudential Committee was finding it increasingly difficult to keep a finger on every concern of the parish. The tax collectors were hard put to collect funds for paying the minister, keeping up the meeting house, running the schools and the jail, as well as all the other activities made necessary by the constant growth of the population. Since taxes were levied independently for each function, the collection must have been a headache for the tax collectors as well as for the tax payers. No wonder we find frequent reference to delinquents for this or that tax. Thus in 1836, ninety-six years after the people of the North Quarter of Pettipaug broke away from that parish and formed one of their own, their great-grandchildren broke the bonds that held church and state, and formed a separate and independent town



government. Now there were two sets of officers, one to run the affairs of the town, the other to run the affairs of the church.

After the town became a separate unit, the Society members began to think and talk about a new church. First proposed in March of 1845, it was dedicated a year and two-thirds later. We do not know whether the plans for this building came into being with less commotion and discussion than those for the two preceding ones, for the records for those several years are missing. But when they got down to business, things happened quickly. The corner-stone was laid with appropriate exercises on a Tuesday in May, 1846, and the frame raised the following Saturday. The pastor delivered prayer at 8:30 A. M. "and although the day was showery, it [the work] was completed before night, and that without loss of life or injury of limb to anyone." Dinner and supper were served by the ladies from Elizur Ware's kitchen across the way.

On a stormy Wednesday in December of that same year the people dedicated the new building, fling solemnly into the new-fangled "slips" to face a minister in a lower pulpit than that in the old building, a pulpit backed by a slight recess in the otherwise straight rear wall of the building. The recessed organ loft was not added for many years, nor was the basement finished when the new building was dedicated. The first service of Sabbath worship was held in this third meeting house on the first Sunday of the year 1847.



*Third Congregational Meeting House*

This meeting house had a bell, the first one of which we have a record. To celebrate its new building, the Society had the bell rung every evening at 9 for four months. It was also tolled for funerals, knelling out the slow age of the deceased. Once, years later, when the Baptists had their church next to this meeting house, both bells were tolled at once for members of the respective churches, the sound rolling desolately across the hills and vales of Chester.

The curfew bell did not ring for long, however, for eighteen months after the church was dedicated we find a vote to discontinue "ringing the bell at 9 o'clock in the evening at the expense of the Society." A month without the familiar sound and the townspeople protested. The church voted, therefore, "That the Public have the Use of the Church Bell to Ring at 9 o'clock Provided the Society have no part of the Expense to Pay", and it was again rung, the sound swelling out over the town until about 1920.

Shortly after the new meeting house was finished, the church sold the old building on the green to the town for \$300., including the stove and furniture. At first it was used for town meetings, but gradually these were held in the church buildings, school houses, unoccupied stores, etc., since the old building was in a sad state. For the last year or two before the abandoning of the old meeting house, many of the church services were held in the building now housing the Post Office, since the older structure was considered unsafe.

The basement of the new church was not finished for nineteen years, since the men of the church did not see where they could raise the money. So for many years the Rechebite Hall, (then standing at the head of the stone steps in the lower corner of Mrs. Monroe's property) was rented at \$15. per year and used for singing school, church society meetings, lectures, and such. At last, in 1863, the women of the church asked for permission to complete the basement. The men, "deeming it a privilege as well as a duty to co-operate", voted to help in the undertaking "so far as funds may be raised for that purpose", but specified no amount they would contribute. Thus the ladies got their basement, for which they paid themselves.

The records of the next years are studded with mention of raising subscriptions for painting the church, "procuring suitable lamps for lighting the meeting house", setting out trees and grading the lawn, building a parsonage (now Alfred Saffery's home) putting flagstones around the meeting house, etc. The ladies took care of



many details such as putting velvet cushions on the pulpit seat and covering the recess in back of the pulpit with fresco paper, helped with the raising of the subscriptions, and had a large hand in furnishing the basement. The Society *did* vote to buy a "table, stove, sink, etc. for the basement" but the women took care of the carpeting, curtains, dishes, and chairs.

So popular did the new basement become that in December of 1874 the church fathers stipulated that it be used only for lectures on religious or moral subjects except for the ladies society and the Sabbath School. The women were so successful in raising the funds for the projects they undertook that the men finally turned to them more and more for aid. In 1886 we find a record of a committee of "young ladies" appointed to solicit for shingling the roof of the church. So good a choice was made of the church's fairest that more than the necessary sum was subscribed in less than the specified time. The fund raised was sufficient not only for shingling the church, but the barn as well. In addition the stone work around the church was repaired, a pulpit lamp purchased, the fence across the front of the property built, and \$60. paid off on the church debt.



*First Baptist Meeting House*

Shortly before the Congregational people left their meeting house on the green, the Baptists in town, who held membership in the First Baptist Church of Saybrook (in Winthrop), decided the journey through the woods was too arduous and that their number was sufficient to warrant a local society. Accordingly, at a meeting held at David Read's in 1823, the Baptists drew up plans for a meeting house of their own, and set to work to raise the necessary funds and procure the necessary permission from the Mother Church to hold services of their own. Apparently the people who gathered at David Read's house had the situation well in hand before they held this meeting, for work was begun at once on the new Baptist meeting house.

About the same size as the Congregational church on the green, and two stories in height, with decorative corner pilasters and center double door, it stood on the site of William Dumont's home. Inside, across the back, was a vestibule, and over it a balcony. Through some quirk of building the chimney was on the opposite end of the structure from the best place for the stove. An assortment of pails dangled from the stove pipe which traversed the entire length of the room—pails put there to catch the sap from the green wood which the parishioners provided for heating the church. These pails provided the children with an unfailing source of speculation as to which would overflow first.

There was no basement, but when church suppers came into vogue, they were managed by the resourceful women who utilized the space at the rear and in the two aisles of the building. Stationary pews were installed in the main portion, while in the balcony the choir was provided with seats of rather unusual construction, whether to keep the singers alert or to provide good singing posture, we do not know.

Services were held in this building for forty-seven years before the question of a steeple and bell arose. Then two women of the church started a campaign to furnish those desirable adjuncts to the building. By that time the Congregationalists had their new church on the hill, with both a steeple and bell, though for a while an argument raged concerning the height and design of the tower. The builders waited with growing impatience while the two factions debated, and then finally settled the matter summarily by setting the spire on at just the point they had reached when the argument broke out. But at least, the Congregationalist possession of the bell was



enough to spur on the Baptists. So zealous were the two women in their efforts to raise the necessary funds that Elder Russell Jennings decided that the society should be rewarded with a new building, and presented it with the second Baptist church.

On land adjoining the third Congregational meeting house, it was a fine building, complete with steeple and bell, the interior with basement outfitted with pews and pulpit, the second floor a complete church sanctuary, with a large gallery. The good ladies who had raised the money for the steeple and bell on the old building asked that that fund might be used for a ventilating system in the new one, and their request was granted.

The first service in the new Baptist building, on the morning of May 11, 1870, was its dedication as a house of worship. In the afternoon of the same day, the congregation and neighboring pastors ordained Thomas N. Dickinson into the ministry.



*Second Baptist Church Building*

Side by side, then, the two churches stood, their bells on Sunday morning tolling and ringing alternately by arrangement with the two sextons. Services in one church were usually arranged to coincide with services in the other, and the board sidewalk in front of the buildings was thronged with interweaving worshipers as they passed one or the other building to get to their own place of worship.



Rivalry there was, but cooperation too. Near the start of every year joint week-long prayer services were held, first in one building, then the other. When one minister was sick, the leaderless congregation was invited to attend services in the adjoining church.

Improvements in one building were soon followed by comparable changes in the other whenever possible. The Baptist parsonage was built next to their building, and the land graded and planted with trees. Three years after the Baptists moved into their new building, the Congregationalists built an addition onto the back of their church to house the new organ. Some few years later the Baptist church installed a new pipe organ, and the Congregationalists followed suit by purchasing a Hall organ using a water motor—no more hand pumping for them. When electricity was installed and the Baptists purchased an electric motor for their organ, shortly thereafter the adjoining church members followed suit. Electricity meant a new chandelier for the Congregational church, the old ornate kerosene lamp affair being given to the Hadlyme Congregational Society. The Baptists purchased a new chandelier also (described in the local paper as both “costly and beautiful”) and installed lights in the basement.

In 1884 the sanctuary of the Baptist building was kalsomined in the colors found there before the present modernization was begun. At about the same time the Congregational church had a carpet laid, the main body of the church being done by the men, the galleries by the ladies, who also paid for all the carpet. Next there was a new heater installed in the Baptist church, the basement painted, and the old pews replaced by two hundred chairs. The old pulpit in the basement was removed and a new black walnut reading desk installed in its place, and carpet laid on the stairs, platform and aisles. The Congregational church followed suit by remodeling the interior of their sanctuary. The ceiling was poor, and the side walls needed attention. Loud and long were the discussions and arguments, but eventually the all-too-familiar metal covering was put on ceiling and side walls. New pews were installed after the floor had been lowered four inches. Next came water for both buildings, the Baptists providing theirs from a spring on the hill across from their building, the Congregationalists by tapping the water pipes laid across their property to Russell Jennings factory in the ravine behind.

So it went for years, one church spurring the other along. The rivalry, however, was usually pleasant and certainly beneficial.

### CHAPTER III

## “The Meeting Will Come to Order.”

In keeping with the old New England tradition, the meeting house was the center of parish life. It was used not only for Sabbath worship, but also for the weekday meetings which guided the affairs of the community.

In the early days there was no town of Chester as we know it, and the parish itself was the unit, the germ of the town which was to be. The original towns of Colonial Connecticut were extensive. Saybrook included the territory of the present towns of Old Saybrook, Essex (including Ivoryton and Centerbrook), Westbrook, Deep River, and Chester. People living in remote parts of these townships found it difficult to attend the Sabbath services and weekday meetings of the parish society. At first the inhabitants of outlying sections asked only for “winter privileges”. When these had been enjoyed for several years and more residents had come into the neighborhood, the people applied to the General Assembly for permission to form a church or parish. Thus the large original towns gradually broke up into smaller units. They did not easily lose their contact with the mother parish, however, and for many years Chester was known as the Fourth Parish of Saybrook.

What *we* would consider town business was then conducted by the Parish officers under the leadership of the three-man Prudential Committee, elected annually. Meetings attended by men only were concerned with setting the tax rate, appointing the collector for the taxes, selecting the officers for the pound, seating the meeting (for years a subject of great controversy), choosing a janitor, providing facilities for schooling the young of the parish, and settling all other business. These meetings were apt to become heated affairs. Although the women were not admitted to the discussions, they must have had some influence nevertheless. Again and again the men would vote to proceed in a certain manner, and, within a week or two, hold another meeting in which the first vote was rescinded and the exact opposite agreed upon. It is not hard to discern the machinations of the ladies in the background.

There seem to have been no set rules of conduct for the parish meetings, for the records show the passage of several votes concern-



ing the procedure to be followed. At one of the earliest meetings it was voted that "we would pas all our vots by holding up of the hands." At another it was specified that meetings should begin "within one hour after the time of Day Specified in the warning." The meetings were invariably held in the afternoon, although some may have continued into the evening. A notation in 1748 reads: "no vote shall be passed for the future after sunset."

Although the "Lord's Barn" was the most widely used place for the first parish meetings, gradually the men began the custom of opening the meetings there and then adjourning to some neighboring building. Sometimes the nearby school was used, sometimes a house, and on several occasions a shop in the vicinity. One meeting was adjourned to "Capt. Mitchell's shop on account of the small pox."

At first meetings for parish business were held during the week. Gradually, however, the attendance fell off, for the farmers, mechanics, smiths, millers, and other business men did not have the time to spend on such frequent gatherings. For some time thereafter meetings were called for the mid-day intermission between Sunday services. This certainly must have curtailed the discussions and arguments that characterized these meetings.

The selection of men for various committees and positions caused some controversy. Often citizens who had not been present at the meeting refused to serve in capacities to which they had been elected. As a result further meetings were necessary for the choosing of a substitute. Few of the town officials were paid, the exceptions apparently being the janitor of the meeting house and the tax collectors.

The janitors were not highly paid, for in 1759 a Mr. Denison was allowed twelve shillings for sweeping the meeting house. The following year a Mr. Chas. Deming received thirteen shillings for the same job. Forty years later the currency and the system of payment had changed considerably. Bids were asked, the low bidder doing the sweeping for a year for \$5.50. The next year a new doctor in town underbid this at \$5.25. From this lowly start in parish affairs, however, he advanced rapidly, until by 1778 he attained a position on the Prudential Committee.

The tax collectors had as hard a task as any officers in the parish. As the community grew, the number of taxes increased. Separate levies were made for various functions of the government.

For many years the collector of church taxes was given permission to retain a certain percentage of the amount he was able to collect, and still later he was allowed to have, in addition, free use of a pew in the meeting house. At first the collector was allowed 1%, later 1½%, and finally, 2%. Although this was an incentive for him to collect more money, it caused some hard feelings. The whole system was finally discarded when it was once found impossible to obtain from a tax collector all that was due the parish.

At another time when collections had been unusually poor and the parish found itself without funds to meet the minister's salary and other expenses, a meeting voted to exhibit "a Statement of the Debt and credit of the Society and who Due from". In spite of the horrified mutterings of those who owed and felt they should not be forced into paying, the list was published, though in a much shortened form. Publication of the names of tax delinquents brought in most of the back payments and again the parish was solvent for a time.

By 1808 it was felt necessary to have definite rules concerning the procedure in parish meetings and the control of the tax collections. A committee was therefore appointed to draw up a set of "rules and regulations in our Society meetings and Directing the Treasurer in his office and Duty." The results of their deliberations follow:

### *Rules and Regulations for Society Meetings*

We the undersigned being appointed a Committee to Draft and prepare a code of rules to be observed in Society Meeting; also Directions for the Treasurer in his office, Submit the following for Consideration and Approbation.

Resolved That all Society Meetings Whither Warned or adjourned Shall be opened and Officered Within one hour of the time appointed.

Resolved After the Meeting is opened no man shall Stand or Sit with his head Covered without permission.

Resolved That no man Shall speak in open meeting without rising and obtaining leave of the moderator.

Resolved That no man shall speak more than twice to one point—or motion without sense of the meeting is taken and special permission Granted.

### *Directions*

Resolved that the Treasurer of this Society be and he is hereby Directed to keep his accounts in the following manner (Viz.)



on the Left hand page of the book a Credit of all money or orders received with their dates, amount drawn and of whom received, and on the right hand page the Debt of all money or orders paid over and to whom.

Resolved That the Credit and debt shall be produced and read over by the Clerk every annual meeting and that it shall be open for the inspection of those concerned at all times.

Resolved That the Treasurer make a settlement with the Prudential committee by the first Day of March yearly for the past year and cause their receipts in full to be entered in the book of accounts at the bottom of those Pages containing the accounts for that year.

Resolved That the above rules and directions be read in the hearing of the assembly at the opening of every annual meeting.

Signed Jonathan Warner  
Grinnold Clark  
John Mitchel

*Committee*

The assessing and collection of taxes was not the only means the church Society used to meet its financial obligations. Early in 1800 it was voted that a contribution, to make up the deficit in receipts, be taken on the last Sunday of each quarter. Subscriptions were also tried, especially for repairs and new building projects. In 1822 the first recorded Trust Fund in the parish was set up by subscription, the interest to be applied to paying the minister's salary. The list was well subscribed, but apparently some misrepresentations were made by the canvassers, for many people of the parish received the impression that if they gave to this fund they would thereafter be relieved of paying a pew rent.

The idea of renting pews was introduced about 1800. Early in the history of the Society the seats in the meeting house were allocated by committees chosen for the purpose of "seating the meeting". Originally the "Lord's Barn" had rude seats which were assigned to heads of families or individuals according to their wealth or standing in the community. Naturally the committees found it exceedingly difficult to suit all the people involved.

In 1765 permission was granted to five men of the parish to build pews at their own cost in the gallery on the north side of the meeting house, near the middle window. They agreed to remove these pews at any time the Society should request. By the end of that year, however, the Society voted to take up the seats in the meeting house and build pews by subscription, the subscribers not to have

a better right to the pews they paid for than anyone else. This settled the matter of "seating the meeting" for a few years, and provided some funds. In 1775, however, the Society returned to the system of having a committee assign the seats. The group appointed presented a plan which was not agreeable to all the church members, and a subsequent meeting voted to change the assignments. Again they held innumerable meetings in which the appointed committee reported, someone's feelings were injured at being placed in a less advantageous spot than they thought proper, and a new plan was called for. For thirty-two years the Society struggled to "seat the meeting", until in 1800 it was suggested that the pews should be rented to the highest bidder, the choicest locations being offered first and naturally demanding the highest prices. Thus two things could be accomplished: people could sit where they wanted to if they could pay for that privilege, and a source of revenue would be opened to the Society.

This suggestion was discussed from all angles for nine months. Then the Society voted they would sell the pews, the bids payable within one year or interest applicable, "provided we Raise the Sum of Sixty five Pounds, otherwise void and of no effect." An auction followed, and "Sales of the Pews Amounted to the Sum of Seventy two Pounds, Eighteen Shillings and Six pence £ money." At the auction meeting it was voted to give Mrs. Mills, the minister's wife "and fammily the Pew they now Sit in for the year inSuing."

This new arrangement of selling the pews was not completely satisfactory, however, and certain dissatisfied persons asked to be released from their bids and their positions in the meeting house. The Society voted "the Meeting will Do nothing About it," and there the matter rested until the next annual meeting for the sale of pews. At that time those members who did not like the idea of selling pews argued against the matter so successfully that when the auction was finished, the bids amounted to only £33. All sales were thereupon nullified, and the Society returned to the former system of appointing a committee to seat the meeting. For several years committee after committee labored with this problem, for which no satisfactory solution was ever found.

With the building of the Congregational meeting house on the "Green", the pews were again offered for bid at the beginning of each year. As this procedure resulted in the collection of at least a part of the funds necessary for the Society, it was followed more



or less amiably for many years. The Baptists used the same system and the money paid for pew rent constituted a large portion of each families' contribution to the finances of the churches, with the exception of special subscriptions and the funds raised through united efforts of various societies.

As the years went on, the Society and Church meetings of both denominations apparently became more routine affairs. After the town incorporated, in 1834, the Society meetings were concerned only with the government of church affairs. For many years the pastors of the churches kept the records, although by the mid-1800's, clerks were elected. Gradually the minutes of the meetings became more formal and routine, although, knowing the temper of the people of the town, it would be natural to assume that these gatherings remained the same lively affairs that they had been in the early days of the parish.

## CHAPTER IV

### “Make a Joyful Noise . . .”

On a Sabbath morning when all the inhabitants of the parish who could possibly be out of their beds assembled at the meeting house on the hill, our lusty forefathers sang the psalms with a right goodwill. From Saybrook and Centerbrook they brought their method of “lining out” the psalms, a style used by all the smaller parishes. The congregation was familiar with the few tunes used. Part-singing was unknown. As more and more families came into town, bringing different ideas with them, dissatisfaction grew. One of the earliest entries in the first old record book says “something should be done concerning the way of singing.” The older, more conservative folk prevailed for another year, however, in order to have their own way tolerating a deacon who apparently did not have a very good sense of tune or pitch.

Finally the more tuneful among the parish prevailed, and it was voted “Justus Buck shall tune the Psalm on the Sabbath days the year Ensuing.” Apparently he did a satisfactory job, for no further mention is made of music in the church for six years. We may be sure, however, that there was plenty of discussion on the subject around the home-fires in the evening, and at market gatherings during the week. Some of the more advanced members of the parish had heard of a new psalm book which contained a greater variety of tunes of a more sprightly nature. At length the matter came up at meeting, and it was voted to leave it up to the new minister as to whether they should sing Watts’ Psalms or the older version. The new minister was a young man with young ideas, and the change was made to Watts’ Psalms. Thereupon some of the older members of the congregation claimed that they could not manage the new fangled singing and forbore to open their mouths at the Sabbath services.

Large families were the rule in those days, and the sons and daughters of some of the newcomers to town had good voices and longed to use them. These young people, furthermore, had little patience with the old, set ways of the members of the Fourth Society in Saybrook, and, much against the approval of some, formed a singing school and learned to sing Watts’ Psalms properly. Naturally



they wanted to use the new method. Fathers were besieged at their homes and the subject became such a thorn in their sides that they called a parish meeting, wherein it was voted "the Young people shall sing in the Congregation once every Sabbath according to the rules they have learned until the last Monday of January next, and that Jonathan Benjamin shall lead in the Tunes while he stays among them." This being the end of December, the young people may possibly have had four Sabbaths in which to sing once during a service. It was a wedge, however, and we may be sure the younger members persisted in their efforts until further permission was granted.

The church fathers, intent on keeping every aspect of parish affairs under their control, next passed a vote "that the Choirister Shall Tune the Psalms in the Lower part of the Meeting house." Justus Buck, Noah Baldwin, John Silliman and Jared Clark were elected Choiristers "during the pleasure of the Society", or, we suspect, until they got too broadminded as to the tunes used. Shortly thereafter, however, the vote was amended so that "the Choiristers Shall Sit where they Shall think it most convenient in the Meeting house to Tune the Psalms."

Increased interest in the singing led to a desire for Psalm books for all the singers, and, after the new meeting house on the green was built, the Society voted that the trees near the "Lord's Barn" should be sold and the fund thus obtained let out at interest "for the benefit of Singing as the Society Shall hereafter Direct." Music in the Chester parish was here to stay, but it had to be music suitable to the ideas of all the congregation. It was voted, therefore, that "the Choirister who Shall be appointed to Lead in Singing in the Congregation ought to be under the control and Direction of the Leader of the Church and worshiping Assembly."

So from the hill there rolled out over the little parish ever increasing melody as more and more singers found their voices. Older members who clung to the few dreary tunes of their childhood passed on to their reward, and gradually music became a very important part of the life of the church. Both churches had their choirs who led the singing, and, on occasion, offered special selections. Although there were still two services of worship on the Sabbath, morning and evening rather than morning and afternoon, both were shortened. The Sabbath School had come into being, and there the scholars received early instruction in singing which helped them

take their places in the choirs of the churches. The Ecclesiastical Society of the Congregational Church still controlled the books to be used, for in 1845 they authorized the New Congregational Psalm Book to be used in public worship. It took a long while for the stern minded folks to abandon their Puritan heritage in favor of the more stirring hymns of the church.

Although the use of musical instruments was gravely opposed, as time passed they crept into the meeting house. The melodeon and bass viol of the second meeting house were transferred to the third meeting house by the Congregationalists, and the Baptists also had a melodeon in the gallery of their first building. The sale of the old trees around the Lord's Barn to start a music fund was followed by appropriations of money for singing. The first sum noted in the records was in 1845, when \$25. was appropriated for the coming year. Several years later the Society voted to "hire a room in the Racabite Hall for the use of the Singers provided it can be obtained at a reasonable rate", and three years later a new melodeon was purchased for the sum of \$60.

Personalities in the musical life of the churches began to appear. The first organist recorded is mentioned in a vote of the society in 1857, when Miss Sarah Beach was thanked "for her performance on the Melodean, the past year" and it was decided "to make her a Suitable present for her performance". (The next year she received thanks, but no present!) Not until early in 1900 is there any mention of a salary for the organist, but at various times gifts and testimonials were given certain outstanding singers for their services.

One of the notable records of faithfulness in the musical life of the churches is that of Fred Silliman, who for thirty-three years was choirister in the Congregational Church, and held the same office with the Baptists for eight years. The son of Daniel Silliman, an earlier choirister of the Congregational Church, he conducted a singing school for the training of the young vocalists, and gave instrumental lessons as well. Musically Chester is greatly in his debt. The name of George Bogart is remembered by the Baptists for the part he played in spurring on the musical efforts and appreciation of that group. Other choir directors worked long and diligently, and in general the music in both churches was unusually good.

The choirs usually occupied places of prominence in the front of the churches. For a short time the Baptist choir used the gallery at the back of the second church building, but upon request of the



minister (who was lonesome in the front), they moved their melodeon back into the corner at the right of the congregation. In the Congregational church the choir also occupied the right hand corner after the original straight pews were removed together with the "deacons' seats" at either side of the front. The organist at this time was receiving \$25.00 a year for her services "and a Vote of Thanks".

In 1872, after the basement of the Congregational Church had been finished and other necessary improvements made, the musically-minded choir and some of the congregation began talking about a pipe organ. This was a far cry from the good old days when the only music allowable was the "lined-out" psalms. A fund was started to raise \$1600., and by dint of hard work, concerts by the singers of the church, suppers by the women, and subscriptions from the church members, within three years the goal was reached. Belatedly it was discovered that in order to have room for the organ it was necessary to add on to the rear of the church building. This meant the raising of another \$1500. Undaunted, the people set to work again, and soon the addition was in place and the gaily decorated pipes of the new, hand-pumped pipe organ made a background for the minister and the choir, raised to a new place of prominence directly behind the pulpit.

With the old psalm books discarded and hymn books purchased, music flourished for the next twelve years. In that year something seems to have happened, for a newspaper clipping in 1887, reporting the Easter services in the two Chester churches, remarks that in the Congregational Church "no one could criticize the anthem. It was conspicuous by its absence." Shortly a revival of interest is evident, and the choir and organist began journeying to nearby churches to give concerts and assist with the Sabbath services. In their place a substitute organist and young people's choir provided the music.

Early in 1900 the Baptist church installed a new pipe organ. Instead of building on to the back and recessing the organ, however, their gilded pipes formed a square, protruding into the room. The choir still had its corner on the right, but now it was slightly recessed and guarded by a memorial choir rail, given in memory of George A. Bogart who had done so much for the music of the church.

Now cantatas, anthems, and the good old hymns rang out from the two churches on the hill. On clear Sabbath mornings when the windows of both churches were opened to the gentle breezes from

the pond at the rear, sweet strains of harmony were wafted across from one building to the other. It was quite possible to keep track of the progress of the service in the adjoining church, and often a particularly well rendered anthem in one church would cause a bit of hard listening in the other. As a rule, however, both choirs performed at approximately the same time.

When water was piped into the Congregational Church it was suggested that they have a new pipe organ with a water motor, thus doing away with the hot, \$5.00 a year hand pumping job which became a real task at such times when the choir and organist were trying to outdo each other. In 1908 a new Hall organ with a water motor was installed. Andrew Carnegie gave \$800. toward the total cost of \$1800. The decorated pipes and ornate woodwork forming the front of the original organ were used. Later the water motor was replaced by an electric blower.

Sabbath music was not the only concern of the choirs of both churches. Many weekday concerts were given, when quartets, soloists, and instrumentalists performed for the benefit of some worthy cause. The advent of the phonograph was celebrated by a Gramophone Concert featuring a unique variety of recordings and followed by ice cream. A "Mozart and Cracker Social" provided good music, good food, good sociability and a good addition to the fund then being raised. The Baptist people gave an "Old Tyme Concert", with a program listing the performers in olden style and giving instructions for the behaviour of the audience in a distinctive manner. Costumes, old foot stoves, and quaint songs gave a real antique flavor to the evening.

Singing schools were long popular, and, on occasion, so well attended that the Society meeting being held in the same building had to adjourn to a nearby hall in order to make any progress against the variety of sounds emanating from the would-be singers.

From the time when the churches had melodeons, they also had volunteer choirs. These were made up of the young people and those of middle age, with a few older standbys who could be depended upon to be present. Cantatas for Easter and Christmas were prepared every year, and usually at least one anthem for each Sunday. The number of choir members fluctuated from year to year, depending upon the abilities of the singers and the capabilities of the organist who in later years was usually the choir director. In



1898, under the direction of Fred Silliman, the Congregational choir numbered twenty-five regular attendants.

The high point in the music of the churches since the turn of the century came when the United Church choir presented portions of Handel's "Messiah" at Easter in 1946, under the direction of Edward H. Hastings of Dorchester, Massachusetts, a student at Wesleyan University at the time. Old timers in the church and music lovers in the town were outspoken in their praise. Shortly thereafter the Chester choir was host to the choirs of surrounding churches, when a chorus of one hundred and twenty voices participated in a Festival of Music, organized and directed by Mr. Hastings. He gave several brilliant organ recitals which were attended by music lovers from adjoining towns as well as Chester, and his playing was so well liked that the greater part of the congregation would remain in their seats on a Sunday morning to listen to the Postlude, instead of noisily hurrying out of the church.

Thus music came to be a large part of the activities of the two churches, and more and more important to the Sabbath worship in the town, a far cry from the first church service in the Lord's Barn when one doleful psalm was "lined-out" by a deacon and repeated by the congregation, some of whose members had considerable doubts as to the propriety of such a proceeding.

## CHAPTER V

### “Precept upon Precept, Line upon Line . . . .”

Children's religion two hundred years ago was nurtured at home. Clustered around their mother's knee, or sitting decorously on the settle at one side of the fireplace during morning and evening prayers, the children of our forefathers gained their first knowledge of the scriptures. God to them was not so much a heavenly Father as a stern and righteous judge. They were raised under the doctrine that children were born in sin. The Sabbath was a day of gloom and long tedious church services; smiling in church was a sin punishable by brisk birching. Adults caught in this misdemeanor were required to make humble confession of sin before the meeting. Even such simple pleasures as walks in the nearby woods were forbidden on the Sabbath. Children were required to learn long passages of scripture together with the catechism and psalms. In short, religion was a stern and awesome thing. The minister was responsible for visiting the homes in his parish to see that the children were being properly instructed, and youngsters, even when only a few weeks old, were expected to go to church.

Thus the children of Chester were raised, grew up, and nurtured children of their own for several generations. In 1819, exactly fourteen months after the first Sabbath School was organized in the State, a similar school was established in the Chester parish. Thirty-three persons met on a warm June day and listened to one of their number describe the schools being held in Hartford and several other progressive places. The idea appealed to the Chester folk. Some perhaps felt that the children were not being thoroughly grounded in the tenets of their religion. Moreover, since Sabbath Schools were not confined to children only, some of the more conscientious elders may have seen in them a chance to improve their knowledge.

The first Sabbath School session in Chester was held on the first Sunday of July, 1819, in the second meeting house on the green, following the regular morning worship. Eighty scholars were present (36 male and 58 female) together with twelve teachers. This number did not include any very young children. 1759256

The constitution of the Sabbath School Association states “recitations shall be in a low voice that the classes may not interrupt each



other." "In order to continue members of the school the scholars must not be absent from the recitations of the school without sufficient excuse; they must be respectful to their teachers avoiding all whispering and other improper conduct." Small classes would gather in the high-backed square pews, almost little rooms in themselves. Larger groups were out on the benches in the front of the room. As the teacher called upon each pupil in turn, he would stand, clasp his hands behind him, and, in a singsong voice, intone the Bible verses, catechism questions, and psalms he had learned during the week. Teachers were required to keep a record each Sabbath of the number of verses recited, the number of questions answered, and the number of hymns learned. All of these records were carefully entered into the secretary's book, year after year. Today we are amazed to read of the achievements of pupils in that early Sabbath School.

In fifteen weeks one scholar recited 358 catechism questions, 568 Bible verses, 115 hymn verses. That was a good record, but even a poor one showed a sizeable number of recitations. At the end of the year the number of recitations was totaled. In 1827 they numbered 8223, with the girls accounting for 6497, the boys for 1726. The following year the girls recited 11,338 times and the boys 4085, for a grand total of 15,423 recitations.

For the first eight years the school was held only during the fifteen summer weeks, since the second meeting house was unheated during the winter. School began the last Sabbath in May, and closed in October. At first the church Society had little to do with the school, its affairs being managed by the Sabbath School Association of Chester, with a board of five directors, a treasurer, and yearly dues of 50c. The Association held annual meetings, appointed teachers who were required to be of blameless character and "thoroughly intelligent", made provision for the materials for study, which were used, and generally looked after the welfare of the school. Occasionally the teachers and directors held meetings to discuss ways of making the school more interesting.

After thirty-five years, the church Society evidenced an official interest in the school's affairs, voting in 1844 that "the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism be introduced into the Sabbath School as a text book." Four years later they appropriated the first sum of money, ten dollars, "for books and papers". A few years later the Society treasurer was authorized to make up the deficiency "in the collection now being made for supplying the S School with the

Youth's Dayspring." In that same year a school library was set up, contributions of books being made by interested persons in the community, with the church Society providing a book case.

By 1855 the membership of the Sabbath School was approximately one hundred children, and an unstated number of adults. Every year a child's paper, full of gems of Biblical and moral wisdom, was purchased for each scholar, and the pupils were allowed to take home books from the school library, depending on their behaviour and record of recitations. When the Congregational church moved into its third meeting house the library was increased. The Baptist Sunday School boasted a library also, and apparently exchanged books with the neighboring Baptists in Deep River.

More and more pleasure was being introduced into the lives of the children, although undoubtedly some of the great-grandmothers did not fully approve. The Baptist Sunday School had picnics as early as 1878. Within a few years these developed into sizeable affairs, the Baptist and Congregational schools combining for trips to Fisher's Island and excursions on the river and sound.

For the first sixty-two years all the officers of the Congregational Sabbath School were men, although certain carefully chosen women were allowed the responsibility of teaching the girls' classes. The young children did not belong to the school, and envied their older brothers and sisters. In 1881 Mrs. M. S. Brooks finally persuaded the Association and the church to allow her to form a primary department. The rolls of this department, which began with fifteen scholars, showed seventy-seven members eleven years later. The church paid tribute to Mrs. Brooks' devotion by repeatedly electing her "Lady Superintendent of Small Scholars." She was the first woman to hold an office in any of the regular affairs of the Congregational Church in Chester.

Mrs. Brooks was succeeded as Superintendent of the Primary Department by Miss Elizabeth Smith who had been a teacher in the school for thirteen years. "Miss Libby", as she is still affectionately known, was superintendent of the Congregational Primary Sunday School for twenty-seven years, retiring in 1938 after forty years of devoted and loving service to the church and children of the town. Two hundred and twenty-five of her former scholars banded together to give her a surprise reception and present her with gifts attesting their regard.

The Baptist Sunday School had its own primary department.



In 1887 the record book listed 170 members, 6 officers, 14 teachers in the whole school, with an average Sabbath attendance of 86. The minister apparently had a considerable part in conducting the Sabbath School services, for on several occasions when he could not be present the book records "no school—no preaching, pastor & Superintendent absent". Once during each year in the late 1800's no school was held because "there was a Camp meeting at Tylerville".

Both Congregational and Baptist Sunday Schools gave liberally to various benevolences from their Sabbath collections. One of the items in the Congregational school records reads "A Bible for the desk of a negro church in the South was given by the Baptist Sunday School here in Chester—and *this* Sunday School bought a goodly sized, beautiful toned bell" for the same church.

Various concerts were given by each school. The most important was Children's Day in the Spring. These concerts featured elaborate decoration and presentation, and became so popular with scholars and parents that the morning service once a year was given over to the children, and a definite effort made to have the adjoining churches hold Children's Day on succeeding Sundays. The entire congregation of one church moved over to the other edifice to see, hear, enjoy, criticize and praise.

Gradually the classes of older people dissolved, until in place of a school consisting of grandparents, parents and children, that of late years has been given over entirely to the children. Lessons now are a far cry from the time when a scholar recited "in a low voice" and "whispering and other improper conduct" were causes for dis-barring children from attendance. Educational methods in the Sunday schools changed to keep pace with those in the public schools. Rooms which years ago held six classes of softly spoken children became overcrowded with six classes of youngsters brought up under the doctrine of self-expression. The old "opening exercises" gave way to a more impressive and devotional worship service, either in a makeshift chapel with a small altar or around a worship center set up in part of the large room. This is a far cry indeed, from the time when the church records state the Sunday School music was to be held at the close of the meeting, at 10:35, "providing the organist be on hand to provide the musical accompaniment."

With the uniting of the Baptist and Congregational churches, and the resulting combination of the two Sabbath Schools, departments were re-arranged to make the best possible use of the available

space. The Nursery and Primary Department, by far the largest group in the school, took over the former Baptist basement and nursery room. The Junior and Intermediate Department met in the basement of the East Building, a room used by all the clubs and societies of the church, and not really adequate for any of them.

So has the religious education of the children of Chester changed. In 1819 the Sunday School was an adjunct to the church and a supplement to the home teaching of the children. Now it is the agency through which most of the religious training and knowledge of the future church members is obtained.



## CHAPTER VI

### “Holy Men and True”

While the first few ministers of the infant parish of Chester had their own trials, sometimes they themselves were a trial to the people. The first minister, Rev. Jared Harrison, found it difficult to get the congregation to agree on him long enough to ordain him. Finally, two years after his ordination, he was dismissed from the “soity,” [society] with money still owed him. The Prudential Committee, charged with getting “a good Authordock minister,” travelled far, consulting with others and bringing in several men for approval. For eight years the struggle went on, while parish members met and disagreed, keeping men in the pulpit for only a few months at a time. Several were not orthodox enough, and one was satisfactory until they discovered that he was preaching other ministers’ sermons.

Finally a clergyman, Rev. Simeon Stoddard, was found who suited, but still caution prevailed. He was offered a salary of £50 a year for the first three years, £55 for the fourth year, and £60 for the fifth. The only further increase to be made was the addition of £3 for each £1000 gained in the tax list of the parish. Rev. Stoddard remained as pastor for nearly seven years, and, we presume, attained the £60 salary. Like his predecessors, he was not always able to collect it, and died “in harness” with both money and provisions owed him by the church.

The next minister, Rev. Elijah Mason, asked for and was promised a salary of £60 yearly. He too, however, found it hard to make ends meet when supplies were not delivered to his door and funds put into his hands. At his death a local young man, Robert Silliman, was approached as to his inclination to preach in Chester. He had had several years of preaching in other towns, was a level-headed person, and requested a salary of £66, as usual one third in cash, the remainder in provision. In addition to being a persuasive preacher he was also a good business man, for he furnished receipts for his year’s salary, with itemized accounts of money and produce received together with a list of the donors of each and the dates on which he received their contributions. It is

amusing to note how soon after the close of each year his itemized receipts are recorded in his own handwriting in the old records.

The War of Rebellion led Rev. Silliman to request an increase in his salary to £70 because of "the Extraordinary rise of the price of Every necessary of Life". After several meetings to discuss the matter the raise was approved, yet it is interesting to note that in the records for the next year is found the first mention of unpaid salary. The following year a meeting voted to rescind the increase previously granted. Since the poor man hadn't received the greater part of his salary it must have distressed many of the townspeople, for he was beloved by all. When, in the following year, they made a special effort to raise the money and furnish the produce, they voted to ask Rev. Silliman if he would accept £66 for the amount still in arrears for the past year. He replied "Considering the Distress of the present times [this] is Cheerfully Accepted By me". He never received his back salary, however, for he died within the month.

For the next half-year the parish hired a man from Pogwonk on probation, with a salary of £30 in produce, the use of half of David Warner's dwelling, his firewood "cut out fit for the fire, the Keeping of his Horse . . . and the moving of his family into Sd. House." Those parishioners who paid their assessment in wheat were to have it figured at the rate of six shillings per bushel. The farmers who brought in wheat or food to the parson were apparently given a receipt, for the minutes go on to state that anyone who could produce a receipt for 1779 should be excused from paying his proportionable part of an assessment laid on the society members in that year. This minister, Rev. Gilbert Smith, remained on probation for another six months, and for the second period was hired at the rate of four bushels of wheat per week "or other provisions equivalent".

For some years the parish could not agree on a minister (perhaps no minister would accept this flock, who knows?). The affairs of the still young parish were not in a very healthy state. Church membership reached an all time low, and there was a feeling of lethargy that boded ill for the church in Chester. A few of the older devoted parish leaders kept their faith and tried to keep the spark alive. When their efforts seemed unavailing, at a slimly attended parish meeting they voted to send a committee to the Association in June "to Ask their Advice and Assistance for us under our broken and Desolate circumstances." This advice, whatever it may have been, was apparently of some help for the parish struggled on



a few years longer. Finally a revival of interest prompted them to hire a regular minister, although it took eleven parish meetings to agree on this action. An epidemic of small pox may have hastened their decision, with some people feeling that the visitation of this disease was a warning to them to mend their unsettled ways. At any rate, Rev. Samuel Mills was called, his settlement to be £20 worth of land and a house "as good as Mr. John Buckingham's and as well finished" if he stayed in Chester fifteen years. His salary, was to be £60 a year for the first three years, and thereafter £65 if the settlement was by that time completed.

It was during Rev. Mills pastorate that parishioners from the west district near the lake, whose grandfathers had travelled a much greater distance to worship in Pettipaug, found it too arduous to travel in to services. Therefore the minister was granted permission to "preach in New school house near the Pond every fourth Sabbath During the winter season." Church attendance was not as strictly regulated as in former days, no fines being laid for non-attendance. Members even asked the minister to have the Sabbath meetings during the three winter months begin at quarter to eleven in the morning and to have a one hour intermission at noon. How the spirits of their hardy grandfathers must have shuddered at these evidences of softness and faintheartedness!

Even Rev. Mills, in his personal affairs, found the times trying. Within two years after the death of his first wife he married again, this marriage lasting only, two years. The advent of a third wife the following year coincided with a revival of Christian faith and works. Parish affairs improved, with a doubling of the church membership.

Perhaps the use of the new church building, (the second meeting house, now the town hall) had something to do with the revival of interest. During the next half century the matter of ministers does not seem to have caused any great concern. They came and went regularly, most of them seeming to be exactly the men the town needed and wanted. The parish was greatly concerned with its spiritual health, with the ministers sharing that concern, so that a spirit of harmony prevailed.

The clergymen, as usual, were not highly paid. Often they agreed to take less than the salary, originally stipulated, depending on the amount of money in prospect for the coming year. In 1820 Rev. Neh. Beardsley drew up a paper as follows:

Saybrook Dec 21st 1820

In the presence of Jonathan Warner Esqr. Capt. Wm. Southworth and Mr. Brader Barker who are appointed by the fourth Society in Saybrooke for a committee to confer with me on the subject of my salary for the year of our Lord One thousand eight hundred and twenty one, I do agree to accept the sum of Three hundred and twenty dollars as a recompense for my services with them in the work of the ministry of the gospel for the year above written. The sum which they raised from the sale of the pews and from subscription was Three hundred fourteen dollars and ten cents. But Jonathan Warner Esqr engaged to make it up Three hundred and twenty dollars—In case however that he should not, I then agree to accept the said sum of Three hundred fourteen dollars and ten cents, as witness my hand

Neh. B Beardsley

Some of the pastors found it necessary to augment their salary by instructing sons of the wealthier residents in subjects not to be found in the public schools of that day. One clever parson, Rev. A. S. Chesebrough, issued regularly a small, exquisitely, hand written "Catalogue of the Inhabitants of the Fourth Parish", listing every family by name and occupation and giving all members of the family even down to servants and boarders. These catalogues were divided into sections according to the divisions of the town, with the minister listing his schedule of visits in several of them. Baptisms, marriages, births, deaths—all are there in copperplate handwriting.

The ministers kept the parish records also, some being more conscientious about it than others. Until 1786, some forty-four years after the parish was formed, no record of church membership, births, deaths or marriages was kept. Thereafter the ministers assumed this responsibility. Frequently when a new man came into town he looked over his flock with practiced eye, made diligent inquiries into the lives of his people, and compiled a new, up-to-date list.

They must have been busy men, those early ministers of ours. Their duties included the preaching of two hour-long sermons on Sunday (sermons which must be strictly and thunderingly orthodox); a preparatory lecture on the Friday or Saturday evening preceding the communion service; frequent calls on the members of the parish; their own private efforts to augment their slim and too often unpaid salary; the keeping of the parish records; attendance



at out-of-town meetings, an arduous task when travel was by horse-back over bad roads.

Ministers were received into a new congregation by impressive "ordination" services, and all the surrounding ministers attended. They were dismissed by the reverse of this process, the ordination and dismissal services occupying the better part of a day each, which often meant that the attending ministers were away from home two days or more. Attendance at disciplinary meetings in various parishes was required, since affairs in other towns proceeded no more smoothly than in Chester, and surrounding clergymen were called in to give their advice and counsel. So numerous did these meetings, ordinations, dismissals and conferences become that the poor ministers found it hard to supply the necessary money. Eventually, it was voted that the expenses of pastors and delegates to meetings "abroad shall be paid out of parish funds not otherwise appropriated". Those last three words must be noted, however, for there were seldom funds "not otherwise appropriated", since the Society was always in monetary difficulties.

When the Baptist society first started holding services in Chester it had no regular minister. For ten years various godly elders of that congregation acted as pastors, until the first minister was hired in 1834. During the next seventeen years eight clergymen came and went, until in 1851 the men of the parish again acted as preachers.

The years between 1851 and 1868 were crucial ones in the history of the Baptist church. Despite its enthusiastic birth thirty years earlier, it nearly disbanded during this time of national unrest caused by the slavery question and the ensuing Civil War. Many of the members believed that the church should be allowed to dissolve, to be reorganized at a later date. Rev. George Gorham, just returned from his duties as a Chaplain in the Civil War in precarious health, could not bring himself to accept such action. Completely ignoring himself, he worked tirelessly for the larger good of his neighbors, and brought the Baptist church through its crisis, dying soon afterwards worn out by his service to his fellowmen both at war and at home.

Another local minister, Rev. Russell Jennings of Deep River, had at various times preached in the Baptist church and was deeply concerned in its welfare. He was a fairly wealthy man, and, in addition to watching over the spiritual needs of churches in these small towns, gave them buildings when he felt the time was propitious.

It was he who provided the local Baptist society with its second church building and a parsonage. Like the Congregationalists, the Baptists were never affluent, and Reverend Jennings paid nearly half the minister's annual salary for several years. In 1882 he established a trust fund, the interest from which was to be used for paying the pastor's salary.

So for many years there were two ministers in town, Baptist and Congregationalist, sharing the work and guiding their respective flocks in paths of righteousness. For the most part they seem to have been fairly tolerant of each other's activities, although occasionally we find mention of overtures made by one which were spurned by the other, or invitations made by one body for joint services and ignored by the other. For years, however, joint prayer services were held nightly, for a week early in the year, the congregations alternating in the use of the buildings and the pastors conducting jointly. In 1894 the Baptist minister conducted the first Easter "Dawn Service", but held it on Good Friday in the church building. Members of both churches were attracted to this novelty in the observance of Easter. When one parson was ill or had been called out of town to attend a meeting, his flock would worship with the other congregation. More and more this came to be true, and the people of one church came to attend suppers, lectures, and special entertainments in the other. This was especially true when the two church buildings standing side by side on the hill forced the congregations into more or less awareness of the other's affairs.

Ministers of the late 1800's were considerably different from their predecessors. One Congregational pastor, Rev. Alexander Hall, gave health lectures on Sunday evening in place of the usual sermon. After this series of lectures were over, he announced that one Sunday evening a month would be designated as "non-church members night", with only those people not in the habit of going to church invited to attend. To the consternation of the devout church members, the attendance on those evenings was greater than it ever was for a regular church service. After the first of these services the local paper carried an item which stated "in the auditorium could be seen persons that had not attended religious services for many years."

So ministers came and went. Some were mourned at their going, while others were speeded on their way. The Chester correspondent of the local newspaper reported on the resignation of one



minister of the town: "It is a well-known fact that any pastor of the Baptist Church in this vicinity has a hard and stiff-necked generation to deal with, and if they manage to remain a couple of years, it is quite as well as Gabriel himself could do." Not always was the congregation at fault. In several instances the minister himself was suited neither to his calling nor to the locality. In general, however, the churches seem to have been well supplied with superior guidance in their spiritual affairs, not only in the matter of pastors, but also in their choice of deacons.

Ministers came and went, but deacons were permanent fixtures. They were elected for life, and held a respected position in the parish. Very early in the history of the church they "lined-out" the psalm, rising from the deacon's seat below the high pulpit to face the congregation. For this reason deacons must needs be men with some "book-learning." The first line of a psalm was intoned in a solemn voice, as nearly on key as possible, and the congregation followed. By the second line the congregation took hold with a will, so that by the third, everyone was singing, and could hardly wait for their leader to give out the fourth line before lustily bawling it out. Although the result was not exactly musical, it was the best they could do, and the three or four most widely used psalms were sung thus Sabbath after Sabbath.

After the musical part of the service was taken over by others, the deacons kept a stern eye on the congregation. In later church buildings the deacon's seats became those to either side of the pulpit and at right angles to the congregation. There they sat, a larger number now, still showing by stern example and reverent demeanor that they were a group set apart. They also had charge of providing for the poor of the parish. At first this was not too arduous a task, consisting mainly of seeing that any needy were cared for by some more prosperous neighbor. Finally, some ninety years after the Congregational church was organized, there was a fund instituted from the collections taken up at the close of the communion services. Money from this fund, together with a levy of 12½c per person, was used to support aged and dependent persons of the parish. Also the funds remaining in the Society treasury at the close of a year were supposed to be allocated to the deacons for poor relief. Since the Society was usually in an indigent state itself, the poor fund benefited little thereby.

Many of the early deacons of Chester are remembered still. It

was a title not lightly bestowed and indeed, some church members disliked the idea of the entire body voting on so important an office. The responsibilities of the office were taken very seriously. Often son succeeded his father in the position. Thomas Silliman, who was ordained deacon of the Congregational church "on the Green" in January of 1781, was succeeded by his son Samuel in 1831. Samuel Silliman "obtained a good report" through a long period. It was said of him that he "knew how to use the office of deacon well", was possessed of a well balanced mind and sound judgment, and that he was fearless in the defense of what he considered right. When he died in 1874, he and his father together had served the Congregational church for nearly a hundred years.

Once elected a deacon, the "Mister" was dropped by everyone in town. Respect for the office and for the holder's judgment was universal, although, being human, the good deacons had all the faults and frailties of common folk and suffered an occasional lapse from grace. Once or twice deacons in the same church disagreed on something, and instances are recorded where one deacon resigned not only from the office, but from the church society, and betook himself to the neighboring body. There, like as not, he was soon elected a deacon in the church of his adoption.

Gradually the functions of the deacons became confined merely to assistance at communion. For some years the title has not been referred to in everyday life. Still elective for life unless the incumbent finds it necessary to resign, the office has gradually changed, being modified with many of the other church offices.

Although most of the ministers who held pastorates in Chester came from out of town, the churches here "raised up" a number of clergymen from among their own members. Amos D. Watrous served his own Baptist church as pastor in 1843, while George Watrous, ordained in September of 1854 went as a missionary to Burma. Hayden Watrous and George C. Chappell entered the ministry from the Baptist church. Near the end of the 19th century a young man, William Johnson, was converted from his life as a drunkard as a result of an invitation to attend services. He became an evangelist and held in the Baptist church a series of meetings which were the means of converting about fifteen people.

The Congregational church has six ministers and a missionary to its credit. Jonathan Silliman and John and William Mitchell became preachers. William Ely and William Baldwin went out from



Chester to spread the gospel to other communities. Samuel T. Mills, son of the Samuel Mills to whom we are indebted for the first list of church membership, was pastor in his hometown for three years. Miss Katie Wilcox, a member of the family which has given so many deacons and musicians to the service of the Congregational church, left Chester to become a missionary in India. She has been responsible for the formation of a large girls' school in that country, and has made a name for herself in the mission field.

Thus by the example and teaching of pastors, deacons, and missionaries both from without and within, the work of the church has been carried forward in Chester and in other parts of the world as well.

## CHAPTER VII

### Saints and Sinners

The hills, vales and woods that made up the Pataquonk section of Saybrook were for many years used only as pasture or woodland by those who had received the land by grants. Perhaps the surrounding towns or parishes were becoming too crowded for the sort of people who were accustomed to having their nearest neighbor some distance away. The Indians had found the territory fertile and healthy, so that late in the 17th century, the sons of the early colonists from England began their settlement in what is now Chester.

The first family came from Haddam in 1692, and was followed four years later by a family from Hadley. At about the same time four families journeyed up the river from Saybrook. Starting early in 1700, a steady influx of sturdy folk set up grist mills on some of Chester's many streams, established farms in its sheltered vales, and crowned its hills with huge chimneyed dwellings, reserving one hill-top for the meeting house. At first the land grants were large, but gradually farms were divided among the sons of the original owners, and houses were built near enough together so that the women could call across the fields to each other. A few rude roads followed the first woodpaths, and the people began to feel stirrings of unity in this rugged northern section of Saybrook. Thus the town was born.

Probably there were not more than fifteen or twenty families residing in the Pataquonk section at the time the Fourth Parish of Saybrook broke away from the mother church in Pettipaug (Centerbrook). The old records of that church indicate that it lost about thirty members by the withdrawal of the northern brethren. Some of the wealthier people lived in the Pataquonk section, however, and their going was keenly felt by the Pettipaug Parish. In the early meagre records of the Fourth Parish the same names recur with monotonous regularity, indicating either that there was a dearth of members to choose from, or that those chosen were unusually efficient men.

Thus the haze of the past obscures most of our knowledge of the number of the early parish members. In 1772, when Reverend



Robert Silliman, the fourth minister of the parish, had settled in Chester and tried to find membership lists, he wrote in his diary:

I, Robert Silliman, found no records left by Rev. Jared Harrison, the first minister, nor any by Rev. Mason, the third minister, but found some records left on a loose paper by Rev. Wm. Stoddard, by reason, I suppose, that there was no proper book provided till now for ye regular recording.

Thirty-seven years after the formation of the Fourth Parish of Saybrook (Congregational), there is recorded the first mention of another religious body when two men presented certificates of attendance from the Baptist Church of a nearby community, asking that they be relieved of paying taxes in the Fourth Parish. The following year four persons presented similar certificates. The movement grew, with each year more and more people claiming attendance at and support of neighboring Baptist churches. Most of them were journeying to Winthrop, but a family or two who had come into the parish from Haddam continued their membership in that town. By 1800 the records state that it was feared that many people were presenting illegal certificates of their attendance at Baptist Society meetings, and a committee was appointed to confer with the Baptists in Saybrook with a view to ending "such fraudulent conduct."

When Rev. Samuel Mills came to the pastorate of the Fourth Parish church in 1786, he took count of his flock and wrote down that there were seven men and fourteen women members in full communion, with twelve men and fifteen women "Covenanters" only.

The old New England pioneers originally formed their churches on the theory that church membership should be restricted to those who could give vivid and satisfactory proof of their conversion. Only such persons and their children could rightly be baptised. Gradually there came into the parishes persons of good moral character who were leading exemplary lives, but who could not give to the stern church fathers a satisfactory account of their religious experience, and consequently could not present their children for baptism. If an individual could not become a church member he had little standing in the community and could hold no political office, whatever his qualifications might be. The more liberal minded folk everywhere protested against this, and in 1657 a ministerial council was called in Boston to consider the matter. It propounded the theory that baptized infants could, on arriving at years of discretion, "own the Covenant" and thus become formal members of the church.

The church was to accept them if they were of good moral character and understood the meaning of the Covenant they were adopting, and was bound to baptize their children. Thus church membership was made a matter of morals and formality for those who did not have a deep inner conviction and could not outwardly prove their conversion.

Here in Chester, for two hundred years there were two groups in the Congregational church; the Ecclesiastical Society which was the governing body, and the church members. Originally the members of the Ecclesiastical Society were the elect—those who had become converted and were the full and true church members. Gradually, however, this group changed character completely, until the Ecclesiastical Society members were not required to be communicants of the church. The Covenanter group developed into the body of members who had given proof of their conversion and were the true church members. Unless they were also members of the Ecclesiastical Society, however, they had no say in the election of Society officers or in the Society affairs.

The parish during the first forty-six years had not increased greatly in size, and, for several years after Rev. Mills listed the members, remained fairly static. Throughout all New England this was a period of little interest in religious affairs, but in 1802 a great revival took place in the colonies. The following year Chester caught the contagion and forty-six persons were admitted into the church at once. The first mention of baptisms in any of the ponds of the parish was recorded at this time. Since the affairs of the town then centered around the locality of the present Goose Hill, we may assume that it was in Watrous Pond that the eight children of Rueben Clark were baptized.

The next item in the records, after Rev. Mills' carefully compiled list of members, is the admission of a negro woman from the grandmother church at Saybrook. There seems to have been some particular significance attached to this action, for in addition to the record in the book, the original certificate is inserted between the pages, an old yellowish cracking paper, marked on the outside "Kate Certificate, April 14, 1787". Inside the faded, old fashioned writing slanted in crowded, brown-inked lines says:

This Certifies that Kate a Negro Woman is a member in full Communion & in Good Standing with this Church & having walked in peace and good order is hereby recommended to



Christian fellowship & Communion with you in att the ordinances of the Gospel.

Frederick W<sup>m</sup> Hotchkis  
Pastor of the First Church  
of Christ Saybrook

For the first seventy-six years of life in the parish of Chester, church-going was compulsory by law, those able to be out of their beds on the Sabbath and not appearing at Sabbath worship being hailed before the meeting, reprimanded, and fined. Whether the governing powers felt that the current revival was all that was necessary to keep people in church, or whether the enforcement of this law had become a grievance as tolerance grew, is not certain. After 1815 it was left up to individual congregations to attend to their own means of insuring a respectable number of faces to confront the parson on a Sabbath morning. By this time the Chester parish listed a membership of thirty-two men and sixty-five women, but it is not specified as to whether or not these were Ecclesiastical Society members or Covenanters.

Some years before the legislature removed the penalty for non-church attendance, we find mention of the Chester church chastizing its members. In February, 1812, a meeting was held at the pastor's house to consider the case of a physician of the parish. Those attending impatiently suffered the preliminaries of prayer, psalm singing, and scripture reading. Then they turned expectantly to the committee which had investigated the case. This group of stern men reported that they had conferred with the guilty person "respecting his neglect of Duty, neglect of the Lord's supper—and his speaking disrespectfully of the church in General—& that they had got no satisfaction from him." Although the discussion of his case was heated, it accomplished little.

While no record was made of the disposition of the matter of the physician, in the next fifteen years the more righteous of the parish displayed the greatest zeal in persecuting the sinners of the congregation. Church members were called before the meeting to answer charges such as "habitual neglect of summer worship in this place, and missing communion of the Lord's supper." The favorite method of dealing with these sinners was to appoint a committee to "convene" with the offenders and to suspend them from attending communion for several months. If the convening committee was unsuccessful in bringing a sense of guilt to the minds of those with

whom they labored, they reported back to the meeting, and often a new committee was appointed. Usually, however, the offending members were so impressed with their sins that they appeared before the meeting, made written confession and recantation, were admonished publicly by the pastor, and taken back into the fold. A few more independent or stubborn souls, however, refused to admit their guilt when they came before the meeting, insisting that they be allowed to explain their conduct. The church demanded recantation, not explanation, and in most instances refused to hear the case. One obdurate couple turned a deaf ear to all committees for several years because of a fellow church member, saying only that "they could not Fellowship [with] him nor [in] the Church Inasmuch as the Church do not Join with them in incriminating the said Brother."

When members proved too stubborn to recant, the church suspended them. At first the suspensions were for several months, but if this chastisement had no effect, excommunication followed. Since this usually meant ostracism from one's neighbors, the proceeding generally was effective. The guilty parties would request permission to appear before the meeting, exhibiting the necessary attitude of penitence and humility, and presenting a written confession of their sins "with their names signed to it." Several of those excommunicated left town, however. One man moved to Ohio, and six years later sent back his written confession of sin, asking to be restored to the church. As he had married during this period, perhaps his wife may be credited with achieving what all the committees appointed by the Chester meeting had been unable to perform.

By 1819 the Fourth Parish of Saybrook numbered 115 families. 77 of these were Congregational, 31 Baptist. In this population there were to be found righteous folk and some who gave the others cause for concern. By 1823 the Congregationalists were appointing committees to inquire and make reports on "some instances of Immoralities." Intemperance, profanity, speaking lightly or contemptuously, of religion, not presenting children for baptism—all these were reported by the committees which were appointed at the monthly meetings of the church held for that purpose. Either these committees were successful in their efforts, or the people thought they had better mend their ways, for by August, 1827, there is recorded a church meeting which reported "great unanimity" of feeling in the parish.



With affairs in the Fourth Parish in a healthy state, the church turned its attention to neighboring towns. A committee was appointed to join with a like committee from Hadlyme to visit families in both parishes to "converse with all persons on the interest of their souls." This committee reported "an interested state of feeling on the subject of religion in both Societies". They were "generally received with cordiality & more, though pained in some instances with the stupidity & hardness with which they met . . ." They stirred up such feeling, however, that on the following Sabbath no sermon was preached at the afternoon service, "the whole time being requisite for the admission of members & for the Communion service." Twenty-three persons were admitted at one service; a like number at another. Now all the ardent and righteous folk could sit back and rejoice.

The rejoicing did not last long, however, for within a year a committee was appointed to confer with delinquent members. The church voted that it "ought to proceed to discipline for breeches of the fourth commandment." A year later other committees were reporting people for breaking the seventh commandment. The revival of these inquisitive committees threw some of the more timid people into much soul-searching. One woman voluntarily appeared and admitted violating the seventh commandment. She was "restored to grace" by the church which, if she had kept quiet, would perhaps never have known she had fallen from that estate. A man asked to be dismissed from the church "as he did not feel himself worthy to walk with it." The church sternly replied "Excommunication or death alone dissolve this relation" and denied his request, though they appointed a committee to labor with him.

Both Baptist and Congregational churches distributed tracts to their members and staged revivals. The Congregational church maintained a standing committee to visit parish members "with a view to edification; and to attend to any cases of delinquency which might exist." This committee brought up cases of people not attending church for two years, intemperance in addition to non-attendance, slander, illegal receipt of pensions, and general delinquency. One woman was suspended for a year because "her conduct has brought a scandal & disgrace upon the Church." Excommunications became frequent, neighbor turned against neighbor, father against son. One of the oldest, more ardent church members and his wife were found delinquent, and this matter, failing of settlement among the parish

members, was taken to the state association. The result of this crusading spirit was that some families moved out of town, while many members were forgiven and received back into the favor of the church.

One courageous person appeared before the meeting, confessed the sin of which he was accused, and then turned the finger on the righteous committee and smug faced congregation by specifically pointing out to them how their united conduct had forced him to err. Consternation and meetings followed. There were excited huddles whenever men met at the mill, at the smithy, or in the fields. Eventually the intrepid one was called to face the church again. Proudly but alone he stood before the assembled group. Everyone in town was there, Congregational, Baptist, or nothing at all, whether or not he had a vote. Slowly the chairman of the committee arose and gravely said that the church acknowledged its guilt, but—and all eyes turned to that lone figure standing before them—either he must make written confession of his guilt, be admonished by the church and pastor, or they would excommunicate him. Bravely the offender looked around at the weathered faces. Eyes dropped before his glance. No one stirred until he turned again to the committee, bowed low, and walked out of the meeting and out of town.

Many others were walking out of town, too. While we cannot be certain that people from Chester parish joined the great trek to Ohio, suddenly there appears many records of dismissals to churches in that territory. Apparently some members left without getting a letter to another parish church, for in 1842, just over a hundred years after the Congregational church was formed, there was great anxiety expressed over the number of non-residents who still retained their membership in Chester, the number being twenty-three at that time. By-Laws to prevent the increase of such non-profitable members were suggested and adopted. These provided that members leaving should join some other church within one year, and likewise those coming into town should join this church within the same period. Moreover they tackled a rider onto these By-Laws regarding church membership. The sale and use of intoxicating liquors was considered to be opposed to the spirit and requirements of the Christian religion, and those so indulging were to be regarded "as inconsistent with a credible profession of religion". The liquor question had been agitating the people of the town for some eighteen years past, and in these first recorded By-Laws the church took its stand.



The Congregationalists were not only losing members to other states; requests for dismissal to join the Baptists were steadily coming in. Originally, when these requests were granted, or recognition given of the certificates of attendance at Baptist churches in neighboring towns, the persons affected were members of the First Baptist Church of Saybrook (the Winthrop church). Until 1823 the Baptist families from Chester parish made the journey to Winthrop through winter cold and storm, through summer heat and dust, down rocky, winding roads to the church of their faith some four miles away. The Baptists, like the Congregational members nearly a hundred years earlier, met one day in the home of a parishioner (one David Read of Killingworth). There many long hours of thought, discussion, planning, and labor bore fruit in the decision to build a house of worship in the parish of Chester.

Although, with the building of the first Baptist meeting house, the people did not have to journey out of town, for ten years they retained their membership in the First Baptist Church of Saybrook. During that time they had no regular minister, with preaching by elders, deacons, and an occasional visiting minister. By 1832, however, the Baptists formally organized their society in Chester with sixty-six members. The growth of this flourishing group caused some concern among their Congregational brethren, and for a few years requests for dismissal from that society to join the Baptists were frequently denied "out of regard to the feelings of two or three who would have been aggrieved by such an act." A man and his wife were disowned for their "disorderly" conduct in "uniting with the Baptist Church in this place." At last, however, a more charitable spirit prevailed, and the Congregational church was content to withdraw "watch and ward" from those who desired to leave the fold in favor of the Baptist church.

During one six year pastorate 152 new members were received into the Congregational church. The Baptist society was slowly growing, also. There were occasional lapses from grace, for each year a committee was appointed to investigate any member absent from services for six months, or any one concerning whom rumors of unchristian conduct were heard. Prayer meetings became more largely attended, with the two congregations often joining for a week of prayer. A few members were dismissed from the Baptist church for continual non-attendance at services, refusal to support the church and its ordinances, intemperance, or absence from com-

munion. Nevertheless a feeling of tolerance and general good will became increasingly evident. The Baptist people requested more services during the week and on Sunday, but after these had been held for a few months the pastor asked permission to go back to the old schedule because of the falling off of attendance. The men of that church met to see what could be done about the morals of the young men in town. The children in the Sabbath schools were taught to lead blameless lives. The choirs sang of the blessings to be found in Christian love.

In 1892 the Congregational church celebrated its 150th anniversary with a "very, large" meeting, "but none too large for the hospitality of the church". Its membership at the time was two hundred seventy-nine, but a number of people on this list lived out of town and were not active. It was voted, therefore, that after three years absence a name should be placed on the absentee list, and one year later should be dropped without any special vote of the church. This was, however, seldom carried out, and there was a large non-resident membership list in each church.

Parish and church affairs moved along fairly quietly, at least as far as the records indicate. Routine matters were discussed at meetings, members came and went, and the two churches lived side by side in general peace. The Baptist church reached its peak of membership at about the turn of the century (1900). Thereafter it became increasingly difficult to support the church and a minister. This church celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1932 with special services both morning and afternoon, and with a determined note of optimism entered its second century. Finances, however, were not becoming easier in either church. More and more young people were going out of town to further education or promising jobs, after finishing high school. Among the members of both churches arose a feeling that the two denominations should unite. Some, of course, opposed this action, but the idea grew, until, in January of 1933, it was suggested in a Congregational church meeting, that the two bodies should unite.

Nothing much was done about the matter for six years, but the germ of the idea had been planted, and resulted (in April of 1939) in the appointment of a committee of six from each church to meet and talk over possibilities. After twenty-three months of arranging details, meetings of each church body were held on the same night in the adjoining churches, the proposed conditions of merger



thoroughly read and discussed, and accepted unanimously by each congregation. The Baptists completed their vote first, so a messenger was sent across the lawns and the intervening road to carry the good word. This was on March 31, 1941.

Within the next two weeks the papers were prepared, and on April 15, 1941, the Trustees of the Baptist Church and the Committee representing the Ecclesiastical Society and the Congregational Church members met in the vestry, of that church. There, before a Notary Public, the unification agreement and the deeds transferring all properties of both churches to the United Church of Chester, were signed. With this signing both Baptist and Congregational churches of Chester went out of existence and the United Church was born.

This new church had no officers except the deacons of each former body who were, by the agreement, carried over as deacons of the new church. Nor had it a pastor. Therefore a general meeting was called for the following night. Then Rev. James W. Lenhart, formerly minister of the Congregational church, was issued a call to become the first pastor of the new United Church. At the same time church officers were elected. This meeting was followed in short order by the dissolving of the two hundred year old Ecclesiastical Society of the Congregational Church, and the adoption of By-Laws for the United Church of Chester, a re-united protestant body.

Now the membership list was enlarged and old animosities put aside. New visions, new plans, new ideals beckoned the members. Everything was not perfect, however. That could not be expected in a people as ruggedly individual as the good Yankee stock which makes up these Connecticut communities. Nor could it be hoped that the descendants of those who were so piously, self-righteous and censorious should find everything completely to their liking. In general the atmosphere became one of peace, harmony, and a desire to cooperate in the promotion of a true religious spirit in the town. The number of church members increased until in 1948 it read three hundred and twenty resident, seventy-two non-resident, and thirty-nine inactive members. With the old compulsory church attendance system long abolished, an average Sunday morning saw about a hundred persons worshipping together, although special occasions such as Children's Day or Easter brought out capacity crowds.

## CHAPTER VIII

### “The Female of the Species . . .”

From Jonathan Hough's wife, who, unable to do anything about it publicly herself, nevertheless prodded her husband into instituting measures to relieve her and other females of the tiny settlement of Pataquonk from the long, wearisome, freezingly cold or chokingly hot trek to Sabbath worship in Pettipaug, down to the wives of today who get up in meeting and speak their piece and then serve on the committee afterwards, the women of Chester have always been of more influence than the men would sometimes admit. Those great-great-great-grandmothers of ours might be church members—indeed, they outnumbered the men in that respect two to one—yet they could not speak in meeting, could not vote, could not publicly propose measures for the good of the parish. The number of times the minds of the men were changed *after* parish meetings, however, would indicate that their wives were a power, nonetheless. All the Society offices were held by men for one hundred and forty years. Finally, however, three women were elected to the church committee, and after female suffrage became universal they were allowed to vote on Society matters.

Nevertheless, those earnest women of Chester did not confine their activities on behalf of the parish to blandishment, arguments, or other private means of persuasion with their husbands, fathers and brothers. Before the Congregational church here was one hundred years old, (or in June of 1814, to be precise), the first women's organization was formed, a group of ladies meeting at the pastor's house to launch the “Female benevolent and praying Society of Chester in Saybrook.” Their fragile old record book, handmade from unmatching scraps of paper by the woman who was secretary for twenty-nine years continuously, opens with the constitution which gives as the purpose of the Society “praying with and for each other, for the church of God in this place, and for the building up of the Redeemer's kingdom in the world; . . . and for the relief of the pious poor . . .”

There are a total of seventy-nine names signed to the constitution. Some are unreadable, too well crossed off by the zealous secretary when either death, removal from town, or other conditions



made such deletion necessary. The members agreed to meet on the first Monday of each month in concert with the "Boston Female praying Society," and said that "each member shall consider herself under indispensable obligations to attend". The more zealous members held meetings oftener, sometimes every week—meetings opened by prayer, scripture and singing. As time went on the society took six subscriptions to the *Missionary Herald*, articles from which were read at the meetings. These six copies were circulated among the members, but after the third month, one or two women who had withdrawn from the society asked if they might also see the paper. The group voted that it be allowed, but the secretary, with opinions of her own on the subject, recorded the vote with the notation "not because they have any right to the books, but for the sake of accommodation."

Dues were 1c per member per week, but some of the more affluent members made a contribution of twenty-five or fifty cents upon joining. By the fourth meeting the secretary had \$1.67 in the treasury. At that meeting it was mentioned that a needy member could not attend public worship "for want of suitable apparel—therefore it is concluded by the society to lay out \$1.25 . . . to purchase a pair of shoes, and otherwise to assist her." Several months later two members in "feeble state of health" were given \$1.00 each, and a psalm book was presented to a member destitute of one. Later a Bible for one and an apron for another member was procured. The first mention of outside aid comes fourteen months after the founding of the society, when \$12.00 was sent to the Home Mission Board, and eighteen months later, \$16.00 to Foreign Missions. Frequent items refer to aid to members, contributions to a Bible Society, to the "Education Society in New Haven for Preparing indigent pious young men for the ministry", and contributions towards the local minister's salary, paint for the second meeting house, and the purchase of a window blind for the pulpit window. In the first eleven years of the society's existence the record states \$148.17 was collected, with \$145.96 paid out, almost entirely in benevolences of one sort or another.

All was not completely harmonious, however. We read of a committee appointed to converse with negligent members. One lady desired to withdraw and stated she would pay what she owed, not to the delegation calling on her, but directly into the hands of a destitute member, thus salving her conscience and spurning the group. Another

who had shirked her responsibilities, agreed to attend the meetings and pay the dues.

The collection of dues seems to have been a disturbing element at times, small though the amount was. At one meeting the secretary indignantly wrote of a member, "She is abundantly able to pay and refuses to fulfill a voluntary engagement—Her connection with the society is dissolved and her name erased." We can almost see the set of Sarah Silliman's lips and the quivering of the quill as she resolutely drove it across the page. Another member announced in a meeting that she was going away. Tersely the secretary noted "there is due from her \$1.13 which she said nothing about paying." But withal the society was lenient with those whom they considered had a good reason for not paying the dues. Four sisters found themselves in straightened circumstances, so the society voted "to count their rates as so much given to the Poor."

Deaths of the members are recorded with the secretary's personal observations. Two years after the organization of the group she states "This is the first breach in our Society by Death. May all the sisters take a suitable notice of it." As time went on and the original members of the society grew older and the secretary's handwriting more feeble, more and more of these little notes appear, pointing out, for those who might read in generations to come, the inevitability of that final dissolution of the bond between the society and its individual members.

Twenty years after the organization the secretary wrote:

Today it is 20 Years since we first met to form this Society.  
In the course of that time 72 Members have belonged to it  
of this number 14 have died  
24 have gone away  
14 withdrawn

Members now remaining 20 of These most are aged and feeble and have probably almost finished their course.

Total receipts	217.39
expenditures	210.54

From this time on, although the society struggled along for six years more, the faithful secretary reported fewer and fewer meetings. Because of stormy weather, intense cold, funerals, and other causes, the meetings fell off. In the years 1838 to 1840 several entries read "pleasant day but no one came in to attend meeting". The records end, or drift to a stop, with the notation "May, 27, 1847", but there is no account of a meeting being held. The last annual



meeting was in June, 1843. There were only thirteen names left on the roll. Twenty members had died, twenty-eight gone away, and eighteen withdrawn during the life of the society. The book, started in a hand firm and true with lines evenly spaced, ends with entries slanting on the page, the writing showing the impact of the past thirty-six years on the devoted secretary, Sarah Silliman.

Nothing seems to have been done by the women of the parish for some six years. "The Female praying and benevolent Society" drifted to an end with the going of one minister, and no new society rose in its place until the new pastor had been here some time. Since this six year period coincides with the time when one hundred and fifty-two new members were received into the church, it is possible the women were too busy with other matters to meet as a group. However, the end of this influx of new church members (with the usual two-to-one feminine majority) resulted in the formation, in September of 1853, of the Ladies Benevolent Society.

The Preamble of the Constitution of that Society sets forth its aims thus:

Whereas it is the duty of those who enjoy the light, and privileges of the gospel, to impart the same blessings to the destitute, and to promote, as far as in their power, the cause of Benevolence at home and abroad, we the Subscribers engage to combine our exertions, with the design of aiding, by our industry these important objects, and do hereby form ourselves into an Association for that purpose, and agree to adopt the following

Constitution

Belying the name of the Society, the husbands and sundry other men of the church were invited to join. We cannot say they were encouraged to do so, for the dues for the ladies were set at 12½c for active members, while the men, classed with inactive or honorary members, paid 25c. The constitution was signed by thirty-two active members, twenty-two inactive women and twenty-eight honorary men. The second year the dues for each class were doubled, but the following year they returned to the original sum.

The first act of the new society was to purchase a new Communion service for the church. Although ostensibly the women met to work on community sewing, article 8 of the constitution states that "Members may work for themselves an afternoon, by paying 10 cts. each." Although meetings were to be held regularly every two weeks at various homes, the minutes frequently record postponed meetings "weather being unfavorable" or, "the weather being un-

pleasant the Ladies had to be carried home as usual".

Many evening meetings were held, attended by the men who congregated in one part of the house to discuss those affairs so vital to men's hearts, while the women chattered and sewed in an adjoining room. Occasionally the secretary would record "stormy night, only 30 present." Once she notes that although the walking was very bad, between forty and fifty "ladies & gents" were present.

Later the meetings were held at the Rechebite Hall. Lack of a central meeting place plagued the society for some time, and the women cast thoughtful and calculating glances at the unfinished, floorless space under the third Congregational meeting house. In April of 1864, eleven years after the society was formed, these calculations came to a head with the starting of a subscription paper, on which appear entries of anywhere from 20c to \$10.00. By December of that year the necessary amount, \$800., was raised through Strawberry Festivals, Ice Cream Levees, "Tableaux & Music at Dr. Pratt's Gymnasium", and plain "digging down deep". The ladies got their "Lecture Room", complete with forty settees and a platform. In that year the first Christmas sale was held, a two-day affair, with supper served each day. The total proceeds after expenses were deducted (one of the expenses listed "for Fiddle, \$4.50") were \$307.68.

Various methods of making money for the numerous projects undertaken by the Society were tried, including oyster suppers at the Chester House, special items made to order for some of the women, teas, etc. There is even one notation in the records of a receipt from a certain gentleman of the parish "for engaging the company of two ladies for the evening 12½c." The first quilt the society made was raffled off, but thereafter it was decided that they should be sold outright.

Benevolences were frequent. Articles collected for barrels to be sent to various missions were entered in the records with the approximate cash value and the donor's name. For several years one or more barrels was packed for charities, and during the Civil War this activity was extended to the sick and wounded soldiers. These donations included various articles of clothing, bandages, dried fruit, newspapers, "12 bottles wine & Ketchup", jelly, corn starch, books, and bedding. One such barrel is listed as also containing "Bundle of Child's Papers & Tracts". After the war clothing was sent to the "Freedmen" also.



Taken all in all, the second Ladies Society which extended its membership to the men, was a pretty active group for sixteen years. In addition to undertaking the completion of the basement, they gave money for a desk therein, and bought kerosene lamps for the church and materials for mats (which they made themselves), took care of the painting and varnishing of the Lecture Room, and bought buff shades and fixtures for the windows there. In November of 1869, however, the society disbanded "with one poor lonely officer, Mrs. Hiram H. Clarke and she absent", and reorganized as the "Social Gathering". The parish seems to have paid little attention to this new organization, for the records of the next ten years contain only the dates of the meetings and amounts contributed. In 1879 the group, augmented by some newcomers, resumed the name and activities of the "Ladies Benevolent Society".

Renewed interest evidenced itself in such activities as quilting bees, sewing for individuals, oyster suppers, strawberry and huckleberry festivals, young people's entertainments, socials, musicales, concerts, a "Broom Drill Entertainment" and a "New England Kitchen" held at the Town Hall (the latter "fully attended, quite a success"), etc. The list of events is outstripped by the list of improvements made with the money thus earned. The first business of the society upon reorganization was to buy crockery and silver and have tables made for the basement, which was for some years called the "Ladies Room". The group contributed towards the education of a prospective pastor. When he came and preached in Chester nine years later, however, the ladies apparently regretted wasting their money, for a notation in the record condemns him for advocating free love and spiritualism.

Again clothing was collected and packed for missions, etc. One notation lists six barrels packed for the "Michigan sufferers." Another remarks "sewed for Indians." The chief concern, however, was the church building. The ladies had a great share in purchasing the carpet for the sanctuary, laying the gallery carpet themselves (the same one which was there when the building was put into shape for moving). At the same time they paid for painting the interior. In the same year they agreed to raise money to build a chapel, but the plan came to nothing. Next the vote to buy lights for the outside of the church resulted in kerosene lamps on posts at the edge of the lawn. At about this time the younger women of the church banded together into a "Young Ladies Mission Circle",

and began to give the older women some competition. They purchased a chandelier for the church. The "Benevolent Society" then painted the "Ladies Room", laid a carpet, and bought a dozen and a half chairs, a table, curtains and draperies. A few years later the society made up the balance of a fund given by four of its members towards providing the church with a communion set using individual glasses in place of the old goblets.

Some of the more advanced minds in the group argued in favor of joint efforts on the part of the Benevolent Society and the Young Ladies Mission Circle. The first effort in this direction was a "Crazy Supper", with the proceeds evenly divided between the two groups. In 1888 the first Memorial Day dinner was served, and for this the ladies of the Baptist Sewing Society joined with the Congregational women.

Since the records of the Baptist Sewing Society are unfortunately missing, we do not know when that group was formed. It was originally called "The Young Peoples Aid Society", then "Baptist Sewing Society", and finally, "Ladies Aid". From various sources, however, we can determine that they did for the Baptist church what their sisters were doing for the Congregational church. Rivalry was present, but little animosity. Dates for events were arranged with due consideration for the plans of the opposite group, and gradually certain things became a custom. For instance, the Christmas Sales of the two groups were for many years held a week apart, and the members of one society were expected and fully intended to be present at the neighboring sale. From the church records we know that the ladies of the Baptist church had a hand in installing furnaces in their second building, in painting the basement and replacing the pews with chairs; furnishing the kitchen and equipment for suppers; installing the pipe organ; contributing towards the general treasury of the church; providing the Baptists with a communion set using the individual glasses, etc. In both churches the women's organizations were the bulwark upon which the men leaned, the pivot about which the financial affairs of the churches revolved. The women came to the rescue when a repair job needed doing, when new equipment was necessary, or when the budget deficiency became alarming. It is unfortunate that we do not know exactly what the Baptist women did with their time, energy, and society treasury, but we do know that the combined efforts of a faithful few "moved the mountain".



The ceiling of the Congregational sanctuary needed attention. The arguments, suggestions, plans and remarks were loud, long and various. During the several months of discussion the women voted "to do everything for improving the Church except ceiling it, which is thought best for the men to do." Sometimes we suspect "doing everything" meant literally that, for they, "turned to" on all sorts of jobs. Their decision to do everything except ceil the church, however, still left that job up to the men, who retaliated by asking the ladies "to start a subscription paper and head it with \$700." The women replied that they were willing, but if they undertook raising the money, it was only on the condition that new pews would be installed in place of the original "slips". The discussion raged all summer, until, at an Ecclesiastical Society meeting in September of 1895, the women were allowed to come into the meeting. There they stated that the subscription list was complete, and reversing their previous vote, offered to put a steel ceiling on the church. The meeting agreed to accept this offer and voted that new seats could be put in the auditorium "provided the Ladies have money enough to pay for the same", with the stipulation that "the Ladies are requested to proceed to collect the money subscribed and pay it into the treasurer of the [Ecclesiastical] Society." Apparently the ladies were to be allowed to do just about as they wanted, provided they raised the money.

They worked faithfully, tempering their labors with sociability. The meetings of both denominational groups for many years began in the afternoon, with the women busily sewing, quilting, sorting and packing barrels. They spiced their work by chatting to friends whom they perhaps had not seen since the last meeting two weeks previously, or commenting on the newest style in bustle or bonnet, the latest scandal in town, or the next romance. The snip of scissors punctuated the snip of words, the rustle of packing paper underlined the rustle of the cloth being made up into fancy or useful articles. Then as the hands of the clock twirled around to five o'clock, here and there a woman would slip out of the group and into the cacophony of sound would drift the rattle and clatter of crockery and silver, together with the hiss of the boiling tea water. When the men arrived, sewing was put away and all sat down to supper together. Even this was made a matter of profit. According to the records of the Congregational Benevolent Society, those who had worked during the afternoon paid 10c for the meal, "outsiders 15c." The four

women of one committee vied with those of another in bringing in succulent viands. Finally the suppers became quite elaborate, and the society voted in favor of "plainer Suppers", without suggesting any change in the rate. After supper a time of sociability followed, and invariably into the evening crept a discussion of the next undertaking the women were contemplating. The women's enthusiasm almost invariably led some man to suggest that while the ideas were fine, they were likewise costly.

Cost seems not to have daunted those women. Year after year they undertook improvements and racked their brains for ingenious schemes to finance them. They sold refreshments at the Chester Fair. They gave tiny silk bags to every member of the church in and out of town, asking a penny for each year of the person's age, thus bringing in \$120.47. They held a "Fair of Days", from which the proceeds were \$326., and sponsored an organ recital and a phonograph concert. An apron sale with an apron from every state and territory, as well as fancy work, flowers, ice cream, cake and candy, was followed in the evening by an entertainment with an orchestra, solos, and a spelling match. This was a large affair, held in the Town Hall, where several of their more ambitious programs were given. A "Mozart & Cracker Social" featured the life and works of Mozart and selections on a rented piano, together with a variety of fancy crackers served to the eighty present.

Socials with sometimes amateur and occasionally professional entertainment continued in popularity for many years in both churches. Many of us can pleasantly remember going to these socials and seeing young and old alike join in the games, the singing, and the entertainment, enjoying ourselves with friends and neighbors, and, incidentally, earning money for some change, improvement, or repair to the churches and their equipment.

When the two churches combined, the Baptist Ladies Aid disbanded and its former members joined the Ladies Benevolent Society. That group, dating from September 7, 1853, maintains the traditions and benevolences outlined in the constitution of the society. The annual report given each September shows that the group aids in supporting mission churches and schools in this country and gives to worthy causes outside the home church. First and foremost, however, the Benevolent Society generously supports the United Church and any of its worthy causes and improvements.



## CHAPTER IX

### “We Gather Together . . .”

During the first years of the history of the churches, there seem to have been few societies and gatherings other than those for the government of the church itself. Early in 1800, however, all this began to change. The “Female praying and benevolent Society” was the first of which we have record. Shortly afterwards in 1828 the men of the parish organized a Temperance Society with fifteen members signing a very worthy constitution. At first the society operated as a distinct group, prying into the number of gallons of spirits sold in Chester (1800 gallons during the first year of the society’s efforts) and holding sparsely attended public lectures, open meetings addressed by outsiders and some members, debates, etc. The early efforts of the Society seem to have been directed solely towards convincing members and townspeople of the evil of the sale and use of ardent spirits.

Then came the great crusade. The Congregational church took up the matter by calling before the meeting a brother accused of intemperance, slander, profanity, and the violation of sundry other commandments. This brother’s case disposed of, the church turned its attention to the source of the trouble, the sale of spirits, and discovered (or perhaps suddenly realized), that some of the good society members were purveyors of the cause of various poor souls downfall. Then began heated discussions as to whether “the selling of ardent spirit as a drink is to be deemed a disciplinable offence.” For four months the church records show an average of two meetings a month wherein the matter was heatedly argued. It was finally voted to postpone a decision for four months, despite a protest of the pastor and seven brethren—a protest which is included in the minutes of the meeting, and signed by the names of those dissenting. Eventually it becomes apparent the sale of spirits was not the real bone of contention. The original resolution, about which such a storm of argument and protest arose, reads: “Resolved . . . that we consider the sale & use of ardent spirit, as a drink, an immorality, which ought not to be tolerated in any of its members.” The words flew hot and heavy, and the fists were raised against neighbors and friends, over the words “and use”. Apparently our crusading forefathers were willing to prohibit the sale of liquor,

but too many of them liked a nip now and then and, standing on their rights, determined to continue in its use without being considered "immoral". At any rate, the resolution was finally amended, the words "and use" being omitted, whereupon the pastor, Rev. Mills, offered his resignation. His chief reason for taking this action was his conviction that his influence in the church was waning.

The matter created such a stir that the town fathers voted, in one of the earliest meetings of the town as such, that Chester would not permit public discussion of the liquor question, as it would "invite disunion, disorder, & confusion and [be] demoralizing in its effect, therefore the further discussion of that subject by Lecture or otherwise is in our opinion wholly uncalled for and inexpedient."

Now blacksmith shop and forge, flour mill and market, resounded with loud discussion and heated argument. The men of the town had plenty on their minds—we suspect the women had plenty on theirs, too, and fed afresh the ardor of their menfolk by quotation, argument, and other feminine wiles. As a result, the first "Temperance Society" was disbanded, and the "Chester Total Abstinence Society, Auxiliary to the Total Abstinence Society of Saybrook", was formed, its membership list of two hundred and ten persons showing the names of women as well as men who organized the new society because "it is found necessary to form a Society whose constitution shall prohibit the use of all intoxicating Liquors." This society flourished for many years, but if old newspaper clippings and records are to be believed, it would seem that it did not flourish effectively enough. There are many references to Chester as a place noted for the flow of liquor in its taverns and the *Chester House*, and for the number of drunks to be seen on its streets on a Saturday night. Although this is not an enviable thing to recall, it was a feature of the town, as it was of other towns at that time. The work went on, however, and later an organization for the young people was formed, and temperance teaching introduced into the Sunday Schools of both Baptist and Congregational churches.

The subject of temperance was not the only crusading cause of the formation of a specific society, for in 1839 an earnest group of men and women met to form "The Antislavery cent a week Society of Chester." It was commonly known, however, as the "Chester Library Association", since its chief means of fighting slavery was by the circulation of books to enlighten people regarding that evil.



The preamble to the Constitution states :

Whereas the System of American Slavery as it exists in the United States, is a System of Tyranny, Cruelty and Oppression, and ought not to be tolerated in Any Government and especially in a Government professedly Republican and supposed to be supported by public opinion.

And whereas it is not Generally known what effects Slavery produces on the morals of the people and the Government where Slavery exists.

Now therefore in order that the community may be better informed in relation to the subject,

We the undersigned, do form ourselves into an Association. To be called Library Association of Chester. The object of which shall be to procure books that may be read by All persons who may be desirous of receiving information on the subject of American Slavery.

A subscription fee of 25c plus 1c a week dues entitled the members to read any of the books available. At first books might be held a month, but when it was found that this did not allow sufficient reading time, the limit was increased to two months. The books purchased should have accomplished the purpose of the organization, for among the titles listed are *Emancipation in the West Indies*, *The Antislavery Record* (3 volumes), *Thoughts on Slavery*, and *The Slaves Friend* (3 volumes).

As time went on, more and more societies grew up within the two churches. Interest in missions and missionary giving resulted in the formation of several of these groups. The Congregational church first became mission conscious about thirty years after its organization here in Chester. In December, 1772, a committee was appointed to distribute among the poor in town the contribution of the congregation "on the last publick thanksgiving Day". For seven years any missionary effort was confined to the needy of the parish. In 1779 a committee was appointed "to ask Charity for the Poor late of Newport, R. I."

As the people became more interested in others outside the parish and came more and more under the influence of the various tract and mission societies, we find, at the end of the first one hundred years of church life in Chester, certain months assigned in the Congregational church for mission offerings for special societies. Offerings in January and February went to the American Tract Society; those in March and April to the American Home Mission

Society. July and August benefited the American Bible Society; September and October the American Seamen's Friend Society, and November and December the American Board for Foreign Missions. The first Monday in each January was set aside as a day of special prayer "for ourselves & for the conversion of the world."

Compared with the general rather unhealthy state of the parish and church finances of the Congregational Society, the contributions for "various object of benevolence" as listed for the mid-1800's surprises us. In 1864 the amount was \$522.30. Two years later it was raised to about \$900. For sometime thereafter it varied between five and seven hundred dollars in both churches. The Baptists were zealous in their efforts and, with their slightly smaller congregation, equaled and sometimes exceeded the offerings of the neighboring church.

As missionary giving flourished, there grew up in each church mission societies both home and foreign. These were made up almost entirely of the women, although the minister, poor lone male, was expected to be in attendance at the meetings. Often the same women belonged to both groups in either church, but they had different officers and separate meeting days. Later the two groups combined into one society. Appropriate literature was read and discussed and collections were taken for various mission fields. Quilts were made for mission homes and boxes sent to needy. The young people were encouraged to take an interest. When one of the young women of the Congregational church volunteered for mission service in India, great enthusiasm was aroused, and one of the societies (the Friendly Club) took on the task of supplying a portion of her salary. Glowing reports of her work came back, although letters and her rare visits home give little direct information. Having a missionary from the church has, however, given a great impetus to mission work.

One of the members of the Baptist church who entered the ministry finally became a missionary to Burma. Thus both churches had an active participation in the missionary field.

Gradually the young people of both churches began developing societies of their own. In the Congregational church the young women organized the Friendly Club, holding monthly meetings. At various times Christian Endeavor, Baptist Young People's Union, Pilgrim Fellowship, and small independent groups taking in both young men and women, were formed. For many years it seems as though the societies of the churches were confined to the youth of



the parishes and the women. We find no record of any organization of or for the men until the formation, about twelve years ago, of the Anchor Club. Since it was their pocketbooks that supported the women's work to a great extent, they probably felt they did their share in this way. Certainly a great deal of their time was spent in going to the affairs planned by the women for the benefit of the finances of the two churches.

After the unification of the churches, a new young women's group, next in age classification to the Friendly Club, was formed, adopting the name Junior League. As the members grew older and began to have a flourishing nursery group, the query often was heard "When do you stop being *Juniors*?" Since their chief interest seemed to be babies and young children, they adopted the Sunday School of the United Church as a special project. A later development was the Couples' Club, devoted principally to gathering together couples of various ages who are affiliated with or interested in the church in any manner.

Thus has the work, influence, and character of the church grown, changed, and become enlarged. Now the church building is in use almost daily. Groups not directly affiliated with the church, such as Hi-Y, King's Daughters, etc., use the building for their meetings. The church in Chester, originally the center of the life and government of the parish, with its meeting house used for the sole and common meeting place of the affairs of the people, has gradually resumed its earlier functions. Although for a few years its doors were closed to all but strictly religious affairs, the church has now come to realize that living in all its phases is church business, and, throwing wide its doors, has again become a center of life in the parish.

## CHAPTER X

### “When, in the Course of Human Events . . .”

With the church in Chester a re-united body, enlarged and ambitious for the future, it was only natural that the parish should become interested in rebuilding, combining, or otherwise improving the church plant.

Under the leadership of Rev. E. Ray Burchell, a committee worked for over a year to secure suitable plans. Various suggestions were thoroughly considered for one or the other of the buildings, until at last plans for building an addition at the rear of the Baptist building were presented to the church body. As soon as those plans were approved, a financial campaign was undertaken to raise the amount required. When it was reported that only a little more than half the necessary sum had been realized, it seemed necessary to approach the matter from a different angle. Although another committee was formed, it apparently could come to no agreement for some time. After a six months period of inaction, it was finally suggested that the former Congregational building be moved over and attached to the rear of the old Baptist church. This idea caught the fancy of many of the church members, some of whom had been reluctant to discard either building, or had had a definite preference for one building in particular. Apparently the ideal solution had been found.

Another committee was appointed which procured plans and estimates and presented them to a church meeting in May, 1948. Previously, the architects' plans had been shown to every society and group of the church so that all might be thoroughly familiar with the proposal. Within five days of the meeting which approved the plans, the contractor started work by removing the spire and belfry of the old third meeting house of the Congregational Society. At that time it was discovered that the builders who had erected the steeple, summarily refusing to wait for the ultimate conclusion of the arguments regarding it to subside, had done little more than hang the spire in place. It was suspended from one large beam reaching from the base into the point, and was only connected to the rest of the belfry by the shingles which covered the outside. Little wonder that it swayed with each ringing of the bell!



After the work was once started, it moved rapidly. Within a week the bell was resting on the floor of the front entry, to confront the people who, on June 6, 1948, came to worship for the last time in the old third meeting house of the Congregational Society in Chester. By the end of June the galleries, inside partitions, and rear addition of the building were removed. In their place arose the joists and beams for the new partitions, dividing the space as it was to be in the remodeled building.

When the time came to clear out the meeting houses preparatory to joining the buildings, some furnishings and equipment not usable in the new structure were sold. On a Wednesday in early June a carload of people from the First Baptist Church (colored) of Brooklyn, New York, came to Chester, equipped with checkbook, screwdrivers, hammers, and determination. Before nightfall this little group had removed and loaded onto a truck the oak pews from the former Congregational meeting house. On discovering that the pulpit furniture of the old Baptist church matched the pews from the Congregational building, they purchased them as well. On Friday the truck picked up the pulpit furniture, and the committee, augmented by others of that church, worked far into Saturday night to install pews and pulpit equipment in their building in Brooklyn so that it might be used on the next day. Thus the old pews did not miss a Sunday's use from the time of their installation fifty-three years before, when the women were allowed to have new seats for the meeting house in return for their help in paying for the metal ceiling.

During removal of portions of the masonry foundation to allow placing of the huge beams on which the building was to rest for its journey across the lawns, the lead box placed under the cornerstone on May 19, 1846, was recovered. It was first seen on Saturday, July 3, and removed in a public ceremony on the following Wednesday. At that time the group that gathered in front of the church building followed the exact order of service that was used when the box was placed under the cornerstone, one hundred and two years previously. Three members of the old Congregational Society, dating their membership from 1883, opened the box. Mr. Gilbert Norton pried loose the seal with hammer and chisel, and Miss Elizabeth Smith lifted the cover from the box. It had been planned that Mrs. Elizabeth Goodwin should remove the papers placed in the box so long ago, but when it was found that they were very dry and

powdery, the box was taken among the congregation so that all might see it and glimpse the papers therein.

As a climax to this service, the building began its actual journey. Those watching saw the old building start moving, with not even a shudder, quietly and purposefully, toward its new resting place next door. There the foundation on which it would rest, was coming into being. With mixed feelings of wonder and awe the group dispersed, to await the next gathering of the church for the dedication of the combined buildings as the sixth meeting house of the parish and town.

The plans for combining the two former buildings were arranged in such a manner that the work could be done in stages as funds became available. The sanctuary, using the auditorium of the old Baptist church, but with a chancel recessed into the attached building, was included in the first stage. The vestry of the West Building was to become the Fellowship Hall, adjoined by a modern kitchen in the added building. Primary and Sunday School rooms were to occupy the remainder of the basement floor. The first and second floors, containing parlor, church office, chapel, and Junior and Intermediate department Sunday School rooms, were to be finished as funds became available.

During the interval when neither building of the United Church was usable, the Chester congregation worshiped in Deep River at the invitation of the Congregational and Baptist churches there. Two miles, in these days of easy travel, is little as compared to the long distances our forefathers journeyed to divine worship in the early days of the settlement of the town.

Thus with the usual attendant struggles—the story of the raising of the church buildings indicates that none of them were built without some commotion and upheaval in the prosaic life of the people of the parish and church societies—the present plant is coming into being. A combination of the two buildings for so many years standing side by side, used by the two congregations for so many years worshiping side by side, it is altogether fitting that the united congregation should have a united church building. Thus the hopes and aspirations, the fears and uncertainties, the love and hard work of the builders and users of these two churches become the heritage of the present generation, which faces a united future in a building in which it can see the older ones, but in which it has the certainty of an enlarged and more valuable service to the community



and itself. From a sober beginning two hundred and eight years ago in the common room of Jonathan Hough's dwelling to the modern structure to be dedicated this year (1948), the growth of the church in Chester is a story of more than buildings, more than the men who built them and the women who worked for them. It is the history of a town from infancy to maturity; of a society from its birth pangs to maturer years; of a people who toiled side by side that a faith they cherished might be strong and a cause they believed in might prosper.

## Congregational Ministers

Jared Harrison	-	-	-	-	-	-	1742	1751	died
Simeon Stoddard	-	-	-	-	-	-	1759	1765	died
Elijah Mason	-	-	-	-	-	-	1767	1770	died
Robert Silliman	-	-	-	-	-	-	1772	1781	died
Samuel Mills	-	-	-	-	-	-	1786	1814	died
Neh. B. Beardsley	-	-	-	-	-	-	1816	1822	resigned
William Case	-	-	-	-	-	-	1824	1835	resigned
Samuel T. Mills	-	-	-	-	-	-	1835	1838	resigned
Edward Peterson	-	-	-	-	-	-	1838	1839	resigned
A. S. Chesebrough	-	-	-	-	-	-	1841	1853	resigned
Edgar J. Doolittle	-	-	-	-	-	-	1853	1859	resigned
William S. Wright	-	-	-	-	-	-	1859	1861	resigned
Edgar J. Doolittle	-	-	-	-	-	-	1861	1869	resigned
William D. Morton	-	-	-	-	-	-	1869	1877	resigned
L. T. Spaulding	-	-	-	-	-	-	1877	1878	died
John P. Hawley	-	-	-	-	-	-	1879	1880	resigned
Jabez Backus	-	-	-	-	-	-	1881	1885	resigned
Alexander Hall	-	-	-	-	-	-	1885	1899	resigned
Dwight C. Stone	-	-	-	-	-	-	1899	1902	resigned
W. A. Kirkwood	-	-	-	-	-	-	1902	1906	resigned
E. O. Dyer	-	-	-	-	-	-	1906	1914	died
Frank L. Garfield	-	-	-	-	-	-	1916	1934	resigned
Roger Hazleton	-	-	-	-	-	-	1934	1936	resigned
James W. Lenhart	-	-	-	-	-	-	1936	1941	



## Baptist Ministers

Elder Hodge	-	-	-	-	-	-	1832	1834
William Palmer	-	-	-	-	-	-	1834	1838
Simon Shailer	-	-	-	-	-	-	1838	1839
A. F. Taylor	-	-	-	-	-	-	1839	1840
A. Vangilder	-	-	-	-	-	-	1840	1841
Sylvester Barrows	-	-	-	-	-	-	1841	1843
Amos D. Watrous	-	-	-	-	-	-	1843	1843
Alfred Gates	-	-	-	-	-	-	1843	1846
N. Boughton	-	-	-	-	-	-	1846	1849
Isaac Cheeseboro	-	-	-	-	-	-	1849	1851
E. N. Shailer	-	-	-	-	-	-	1851	
Russell Jennings	-	-	-	-	-	-		to
Wm. Dennison	-	-	-	-	-	-		
Geo. W. Gorham	-	-	-	-	-	-		1870
Thomas N. Dickinson	-	-	-	-	-	-	1870	1870
John Evans	-	-	-	-	-	-	1871	1874
William D. Morgan	-	-	-	-	-	-	1875	1876
O. C. Kirkham	-	-	-	-	-	-	1877	1879
I. G. Noble	-	-	-	-	-	-	1880	1881
Joseph A. Bailey	-	-	-	-	-	-	1882	1884
A. Judson Hughes	-	-	-	-	-	-	1884	1887
George Butterworth	-	-	-	-	-	-	1887	1891
W. A. Atchley	-	-	-	-	-	-	1891	1893
G. M. Evans	-	-	-	-	-	-	1893	1896
Harvey M. Ives	-	-	-	-	-	-	1896	1899
M. Stadtfeld	-	-	-	-	-	-	1899	1906
J. C. Tibbits	-	-	-	-	-	-	1907	1910
F. E. Coburn	-	-	-	-	-	-	1910	1916
Samuel W. Delzell	-	-	-	-	-	-	1916	1924
Mrs. Samuel W. Delzell	-	-	-	-	-	-	1924	1925
Willard F. Johnson	-	-	-	-	-	-	1925	1927
Mrs. Thomas Hughes	-	-	-	-	-	-	1929	1933
Charles E. Butler	-	-	-	-	-	-	1934	1935
Arthur E. Darby	-	-	-	-	-	-	1936	1939

## United Church of Chester

non-sectarian

James W. Lenhart	-	-	-	-	-	-	1941	1941	resigned
E. Ray Burchell	-	-	-	-	-	-	1941		

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